

Yuri Kitayama

Illustrator • Riv

3

Seirei Gensouki: Spirit Chronicles

Requiem for a Goodbye

VISIT...

LANZAROTE
Caliente.COM



"MRRGH...
GOOD
MORNING,
GRANNY..."

Ruri appeared in
the living room,
half-asleep and
still wearing the
underwear she
had slept in.



It was clear from Sayo's reaction that she had taken a liking to the hairpin, so Rio went ahead and bought it anyway.

Knowing Sayo's personality, he figured she would've rejected him if he hadn't done it this way. Sayo finally returned to her senses and bobbed her head furiously at Rio.



"T-THANK
YOU VERY
MUCH!
REALLY,
SIR RIO."

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Prologue: Heritage Clues

Less than a week after he left the spirit folk village, Rio reached the Yagumo region.

It would have been a harsh, two to three month journey on foot — even if he had enhanced his body with spirit arts — but thanks to the wind spirit arts he had learned from the village, he was able to fly the whole way instead. Therefore, he was able to make his journey from the village to Yagumo with relative ease. From that moment on, however, Rio's troubles truly began.

Visiting the Yagumo region to mourn his late parents in their own homeland was understandable, but Rio had almost no information that he'd need to pinpoint the location of their place of birth. The only information he had were their names.

There were over 30 countries of various sizes within the Yagumo region, making his attempt to locate their hometown in this way seem almost futile.

That did not, however, discourage Rio from moving ahead with achieving his goal. He visited all the cities and villages in the western side of Yagumo, with the hopes that he'd find someone who recognized his parents' names.

But having the will didn't necessarily mean there was a way...

Several months passed with no leads.

At present, Rio was visiting the Kingdom of Karasuki, a large nation located in the western area of the Yagumo region. He had already passed through several cities and villages, and was about to head off toward the next village, so he used his wind spirit arts to take to the air. His destination was a small dot on the horizon.

...That village, huh?

With a birds' eye view, he could make out roads stretching out from the east and west sides of the village, a small hill to the north, and an overgrown mountain covered in trees to the south.

It was your typical, idyllic village; unremarkable at best.

The residential area occupied the center of the village, where houses made of wood, lime, and clay stood in rows. Judging by their numbers, the population was probably around three hundred or so. Surrounding the center were fields and pastures, where villagers could be spotted working.

They said that Yuba, the chief of this village, has lots of connections. Rio recalled the information he had gathered from the chief of a neighboring village he had previously visited.

To be honest, he didn't really expect to find much here. At this point, he couldn't even recall how many times he'd gotten his hopes up, only to be disappointed once again... But he wasn't about to give in to his despair.

To avoid making an unnecessary commotion by landing right in the middle of the village, Rio made his descent a reasonable distance away. After touching down on the road leading from the west side of the village, he lightly jogged toward the entrance.

The village was surrounded by a simple wooden fence, with no lookouts stationed at the entrance, allowing Rio to walk in freely.

Even so, there were villagers working on their farms in every direction, so they were aware of the fact that someone had walked in from the outside. Sure enough, as Rio arrived at the entrance of the village, several of the villagers looked up at him.

However, none of them approached — they just watched him from a distance.

The atmosphere nearly made him hesitate from going any further, but any village would be wary of unknown outsiders. This was normal, and it was a reaction that Rio had become very familiar with.

Rio bowed briefly at the farmers, before stepping through the entrance. He calmly walked straight toward the center of the village — where the chief's house was most likely to be located — so that he could finish his business here quickly.

Two girls dressed in simple clothing appeared from the field beside him, and

hesitantly approached. They seemed to be in their teens; one of them looked about two to three years older than the other.

“Umm, did you need something from our village?” The older looking girl asked Rio timidly.

“Hello. My name is Rio,” Rio replied in a formal tone and gave them a friendly smile. “I’m on a journey to search for someone. I’d like to meet the chief of this village... Would they happen to be present at the moment?” he tacked on his question.

His pronunciation was slightly awkward, but he was fluent enough to have no trouble speaking in conversation, thanks to extensive knowledge of Ursula and the others in the spirit folk village. They had taught him the language used in the Yagumo region during their time together. His many months spent wandering through Yagumo also helped.

Rio introduced himself politely and explained his situation, causing the two girls to widen their eyes.

“A-Ah, umm, h-hello. P-Pleased to make your, umm, acquaintance? Are you a traveler? The village chief is in... is... present? Shall I show you the way?” The older girl offered nervously. She didn’t seem very comfortable speaking formally.

“Thank you very much. Many people tend to be wary of outsiders suddenly appearing at their door... If it wouldn’t be an inconvenience, I gladly accept your offer,” Rio thanked her in a calm voice, bowing his head and smiling faintly.

“S-Sure! Then... Umm... Follow me, please!” The older girl nodded with a shrill voice and began to walk toward the center of the village. Meanwhile, the younger girl, who had been standing behind her, stared at Rio’s face in a daze.

“...Is something the matter?” Rio stopped in confusion just as he was about to follow the older girl who had already walked away.

“...Huh? Ah, n-no! I-It’s, umm... it’s nothing!” The younger girl blushed and shook her head furiously.

“What are you doing, Sayo? Come along, now.”

“O-Okay, Ruri!”

Prompted by the older girl named Ruri, Sayo — the younger girl — hurriedly broke out into a run. Rio tilted his head slightly before he set off after them.

The two girls still seemed to be nervous as they walked uncomfortably, all the while shooting looks over their shoulder at Rio on occasion. Sayo, especially, glanced at him quite often.

Are outsiders really that rare? Rio thought, staring at Sayo’s back as they walked.

The three of them maintained that awkward silence and distance until they arrived at the village chief’s house.

“Granny, you have a guest! He says he’s looking for someone!” Ruri yelled loudly as she entered the house. The front door opened to a clay floor that led to an elevated living room, where a sunken fireplace was set up to warm the area.

“You don’t need to be so loud, Ruri. I can hear you perfectly fine... Oh?”

After a moment, an old woman appeared. She spotted Rio standing behind Ruri and Sayo in the entrance and narrowed her eyes.

“Hello — it’s nice to meet you. My name is Rio. I have come today to ask you a few things, village chief,” Rio introduced himself cordially and took a step forward. The old woman widened her eyes.

“Oho, what a polite one we have here. Your clothes are unfamiliar and you have a slight accent... A traveler from a foreign country, perhaps?” The old woman’s gaze analyzed Rio, as though she was trying to identify his origins.

“Yes, I am not from here. I have been traveling through many different countries.”

“I see, I see. ...Ah, forgive me. My name is Yuba. I am sure you are aware of this already, but I am the chief of this village.”

“Pleased to make your acquaintance.” Rio bowed.

“Yes yes, enough of the formalities. Please, do come inside. Ruri, Sayo, go pour some tea.”

“Okay! Let’s go, Sayo,” Ruri replied energetically to Yuba’s order. Sayo nodded awkwardly before heading to the kitchen with her.

“You. Come up to the living room. ...Oof.” Yuba directed Rio to one of the seating cushions before the sunken fireplace and sat down.

“Excuse me.” Rio gave a simple bow before taking off his shoes and stepping up to the living room. Then, he removed the hooded overcoat he had been wearing over the sword and armor he had received from the spirit folk, and placed them on the floor along with his sheathed sword.

“...Those clothes you are wearing under your overcoat are rarely seen in this area. That sword is splendid, but the shape is rather odd. You definitely don’t seem like someone from this country.” Yuba was gazing at his appearance curiously, just as Rio had expected she would.

“Neither my weapons nor my attire were made in this country. I normally wear an overcoat to avoid drawing attention to them.”

“True, your appearance does attract the eye. Not to mention how high quality your equipment is, especially for an average traveler.”

“Yes, these items are excellent. A craftsman I am greatly indebted to made them for me as a special gift.”

“...Is that so. Well, I won’t pry any further than that. The tea is ready now, so let me hear your story.”

Ruri and Sayo were bringing the tea over precisely at that moment, so Yuba cut off the conversation there. The girls split up to each serve Yuba and Rio the tea.

“Thank you very much.” Rio thanked Sayo, as she was the one who left the tea in front of him.

Shaking her head in embarrassment, Sayo retreated to the corner of the room. Her behavior made Ruri smile in amusement. Rio had been wondering about Sayo’s strange behavior for a while now, but tried to put that aside as he began to speak.

“I am searching for someone who knew of my parents when they were alive.

The reason I am visiting this village is because I have heard that Lady Yuba has the most extensive connections of those who live in this area.”

“Hm, I see...” Yuba gave a small nod of understanding, before prompting him to keep talking.

“I believe my mother and father lived in the Yagumo region around fifteen years ago, but I am not sure of the details... Have you ever heard the names Zen and Ayame before, Lady Yuba?” Rio said, naming his parents.

“...Did you just say... Zen... and Ayame...?” Yuba’s eyes widened, the arm that had extended to grab her teacup completely frozen. Her head shot up as she carefully fixed her gaze on Rio’s face.

She definitely seemed to know something; her reaction clearly displayed that. Even Rio’s typically calm demeanor disintegrated as his eyes widened, too.

“Ah, no. I’ll have to hear more about them first,” Yuba hesitated, before giving a vague reply and looking to the girls. “Ruri, Sayo — our discussion may go on longer than expected. You two can return to your work,” she ordered.

“Eeeh... But why?” Ruri pouted her lips unhappily.

“Go on, now. Don’t poke your nose into other people’s personal business. Make sure you keep your lips sealed around the other villagers, too.”

“Okaaay. Tch. And it seemed kind of interesting too... Let’s go, Sayo.” At Yuba’s strict and unyielding words, Ruri reluctantly backed down.

“Y-Yeah.”

After Ruri and Sayo left the house, Yuba looked at Rio and slowly began to speak. “Now, could you give me more details about your parents’ features and characteristics? They may just be someone I know.”

“Sure, of course...” Rio concealed his wavering emotions with a nod, then calmly began to recount their history.

His parents had been born in the Yagumo region. When they were young, they had spent years on a long journey to migrate to the Strahl region. After that, they wandered for a while until Rio was born, and they settled down in the Kingdom of Beltrum. However, Rio’s father Zen died before Rio was old enough

to know him. After that, he lived alone with his mother Ayame.

Rio also explained Ayame's personality and what kind of mother she was, with Yuba listening intently to every one of Rio's words.

"...After that, when I was still young, my mother passed away, too..." Rio's expression darkened a bit as he spoke about his mother's death. He didn't offer any specifics to how she had died; he didn't want to remember it, and he didn't want to speak of it.

To be honest, he still hadn't organized his thoughts about what had happened.

"Thank you for telling me. I must have made you recall some difficult memories... But there's no mistaking it. Those two are definitely the same people I know. In fact, if I look carefully, I can see some of their features in your face. Dear me, old age really does no favors. Hmm, no... Perhaps you could say that it was this old age of mine that allowed us to meet," Yuba said with a somewhat helpless and regretful expression.

"...If you don't mind me asking, how did my parents know you...?" Rio asked fearfully, desperately keeping his voice from wavering.

"I am Zen's mother, and your grandmother. It is nice to finally meet you," Yuba answered, smiling rather awkwardly.

"You're my father's... Ah, umm. It's nice to meet you too." Rio stared at Yuba's face blankly for a moment, before bowing his head uncomfortably. Yuba seemed to recognize her next question as being a difficult one, but she couldn't help but ask it anyway.

"...I'm sorry, but could you tell me a little more? I'd like to hear about your reason for coming to this land from so far away, just to search for information about those two. The effort you've put in, and the hardships you have gone through to reach here, must be far beyond my imagination."

Rio hesitated for a few moments before answering. "...I wanted to make a grave. I don't have any remains or mementos, but I wanted to mourn them in their own homeland. And mom... my mother had promised to take me to her hometown some day. She passed away before we could make that happen, but

I wanted to try to make it to this land myself,” he answered carefully.

“I see. You did well to make it here. However, the truth is... How should I put this? Their graves already exist,” Yuba said with a hint of reluctance.

“Their graves... already exist? But didn’t they leave this land alive?” Rio unintentionally asked out loud, taken by surprise.

“Yes, that’s correct. But their graves exist. Judging by your reaction, it seems you are unaware of their reasons for abandoning their homeland. Is that right?” Yuba asked while peering at Rio’s face.

“Yes, that is true. Does that mean you know why, Lady Yuba?” Rio asked in return.

“Indeed, I know the reason. However, you’ll have to forgive me, as I cannot tell you the details myself.” Yuba shook her head with an apologetic look.

“May I ask why...?”

“Certain circumstances drove the two of them to leave this country in secret. Since there was no chance that they’d return, those who knew the truth constructed graves for them on the hill. That is all I can tell you right now,” Yuba replied, selecting her words carefully.

“They left this country... in secret...”

“For now, I will lead you to their graves. Would you like to hold a memorial service for them?” Yuba offered to a contemplative Rio.

“...Yes, of course. Please allow me to do that.”

To be honest, there was still a lot that was left unclear, but there was no point in Rio pondering over it any more than this. If Yuba had no intention of answering him, then he wasn’t about to force her to. Rio decided to focus on the matter of his parents’ graves first.



Afterward, Yuba led Rio to the small hill a little ways north of the village. The top of the hill offered a sweeping view of the village below and the mountains surrounding it, making the scenery quite beautiful.

Two stone pillars stood before that backdrop. They had been maintained very well, as they were neat and tidy, with no signs of wind erosion.

“These are their graves. Their names aren’t carved on them, but they’re filled with their keepsakes,” Yuba said as she stood before the stone pillars.

“...I see.” Rio nodded vaguely, his eyes fixed on the stone pillars.

“...Perhaps I can tell you what happened to your parents when the time comes,” Yuba said slowly as she looked at Rio. Rio’s eyes widened, and he stared back at her.

“Would you consider staying in this village until that time comes?” Yuba asked, her expression filled with affection.

“...Would that be all right?” Rio questioned worriedly.

“You are my grandson. There’s no need for a grandchild to act modest around his grandmother,” Yuba replied with a bright smile on her face.

“Grandchild... Grandmother...” Rio muttered the words, as though he was mulling over them.

“There are more than enough spare rooms. My relatives have all died from war and sickness, so it’s just me and Ruri right now. She’s the older girl who led you to my home,” Yuba explained as Rio stood there in silence.

“And Ruri, is she...?”

“She’s the daughter of Zen’s older brother, which makes her your cousin. She’s fifteen right now.”

“I see. That makes her one year older than me.”

“...I’m surprised to hear you’re so young. While your face is still childish, your personality is so mature that I mistook you for being older.”

“That’s not true.” Rio finally cracked a faint smile and shook his head. That made Yuba give a huff of laughter.

“Is that so? Well, that’s that. Can I take that as a yes to my offer?”

“Yes. I will be in your care,” Rio said hesitantly, bowing his head at Yuba.

“It would be my pleasure to have you with me. I know it may be difficult to

adjust immediately, but there's no need to be so stiff. Relax, and be at ease," Yuba said with a small shrug.

"Okay... Yuba."

Rio decided to simply call her by her name, instead of "Lady Yuba." When he thought about the fact she was his real grandmother, he found it easier to call her that.

"Fufu. Oh, speaking of which... Is it all right if we hide the truth of your heritage from the rest of the villagers?" Yuba asked with a cheerful grin.

"Of course, that would be fine," Rio agreed, picking up on the implication behind Yuba's words. They couldn't reveal Rio's origins to the village because of the circumstances that had caused Zen and Ayame to leave the country. It was possible — no, it was almost certain — that there would be people in this village that had known them.

"I'm sorry for the inconvenience. We can decide on the rest of the details at the house. I'm going to head back now... Would you like to stay here a little longer?" Yuba asked out of consideration for Rio.

"Yes, please."

"Do you know the way back?"

"I'll be fine."

"Oh? Then make sure you come back before the sun sets. We'll host a welcome party for you, though it will be a small one." With that, Yuba turned on her heel and left.

"Thank you for your hospitality," Rio said, bowing deeply toward Yuba's retreating back. Once Yuba's figure had disappeared from view, he raised his head to the stone pillars.

"...I guess that means I'll be staying at your place for a while, dad. It still hasn't quite sunk in that I have relatives other than the two of you, though..." Rio muttered toward the pillars, a trace of bewilderment in the smile that pulled at his lips. Of course, there was no response.

After a while, he turned around to look at the village. He spent another hour

or so on the hill in sombre silence, before making his way back to the village chief's house just before the sun set.

"Excuse me," Rio said as he hesitantly walked through the open front door. There, Yuba was waiting along with Ruri, who had finished her work.

"Welcome back," they said.

"...Thank you." Rio was taken aback, but he managed to shyly return their greeting.

Then, just as Yuba had said, they held a small welcome party together.

Chapter 1: Life in the Village

The next morning...

The day started early for the village. Rio woke up before sunrise and made his way to the living room of the chief's house.

"Good morning."

"Oh my, you're quite the early riser there. Good morning," Yuba replied with widened eyes. She was already awake, sitting on a cushion in the living room after lighting the fireplace.

"I was thinking of helping out the villagers today with any tasks they might have. But first, could I help you make breakfast in any way?"

"Is that so? If you're offering, then you're more than welcome to do so. I look forward to it."

And so, Rio and Yuba spoke for a while. Until...

"Mrrgh... Good morning, Granny..."

Ruri appeared in the living room, half-asleep and still wearing the underwear she had slept in. It was a slightly scandalous appearance for a girl of her age to be wearing before the opposite sex. Hidden beneath her underwear were limbs that emphasized her feminine softness, and plump breasts that accentuated her upper body.

"Good morning... Have you forgotten about Rio here, by any chance?" Yuba said with stifled laughter.

"...Huh? A-Ah!"

Ruri finally realized that Rio was right there. She hurriedly looked down at herself, then blushed as red as a ripe apple. Rio avoided eye contact, but she took that to mean he had caught a glimpse of her unladylike form.

"I-I'm going to change!" Ruri covered her body with both her hands and ran back to her room.

Rio gave a tired sigh. He had encountered similar situations numerous times before, back when he lived with Latifa in the spirit folk village. Fortunately, it didn't seem like Ruri had the personality to irrationally get mad at him for it, but they would probably be awkward around each other for a little longer.

Sure enough, when Ruri returned from her room several moments later, she watched Rio from the corner of her eye.

Ah, well. I guess there's no helping that...

Ruri was his older cousin, so Rio could honestly say that no strange feelings had risen from that. But that wasn't the case when it came to Ruri's point of view, because she didn't know Rio was her younger cousin.

"So, are you any good at cooking, Rio? You offered to help with breakfast." Yuba smiled cheerily.

"Y-Yes, please leave it to me." Rio nodded with an embarrassed look.

"Then, let's have you make breakfast today and see how it goes. Ruri, go with Rio to trade for breakfast ingredients and introduce him to everyone. Have the village girls get used to seeing his face around here."

"Eh? O-Oh, okay. ...Let's go, Rio." Ruri hesitated for a moment, before giving an uncomfortable nod. She still seemed to be feeling humiliated about her foolishness earlier.

"Oh, and tell Sayo to come to the house with Shin. We'll be having breakfast here," Yuba requested.

"Yes, ma'am..." Ruri answered dully before leaving through the front door with Rio.

Their first destination was the kitchen garden behind the village chief's home. Unlike the fields that were managed by the village, the kitchen gardens were owned by each individual house.

"Our village operates primarily on bartering and trading. The first thing we do every morning is harvest the vegetables grown in our kitchen garden. Then, we bring them to the village square and trade them with the vegetables grown by other families. That makes up the ingredients for a day's worth of meals," Ruri

explained as they gathered the vegetables grown in the village chief's garden. Once they were done harvesting them, they headed toward the village square.

The square was already filled with young women from the village chatting noisily with each other. They ranged from their mid-teens to late twenties in age.

"Morning, everyone!" Ruri greeted them energetically, moving to join a circle of the girls.

"Oh, Ruri. Good mor—" The girls noticed Ruri and cheerfully made to return her greeting, when they noticed the unfamiliar boy behind her and froze on the spot. Before she knew it, Ruri was getting questioning gazes from all the girls.

"Erm, this is Rio. He's the son of one of Granny's old acquaintances and has been traveling around the world. That's why his clothes look a little strange. He'll be staying at our place for a while, so I wanted to introduce him to everyone... Go on, Rio." Ruri carefully watched the reactions of the other girls as she timidly introduced him. She then prompted him to step forward.

"Please allow me to introduce myself. My name is Rio. I have yet to acclimatize myself to life here, so I hope you can find it in your hearts to forgive any inconveniences I may cause in the future. It is a pleasure to meet you all." Rio adopted a friendly smile as he gave his well-mannered greeting.

"Uhm... It's nice to meet you too," the girls replied, mildly embarrassed.

"Hey, Rio. There's no need to use such formal language with us. Everyone gets nervous when a boy like you acts that way," Ruri advised with a wry smile.

"Ah... I'm afraid I'm more accustomed to this form of speech. I will do my best to adjust accordingly," Rio replied with a smile similar to Ruri's.

The women of the village watched their exchange closely; they seemed to be feeling rather bashful in Rio's presence. However, they all shot implicitly questioning looks in Ruri's direction — looks that said it wasn't fair for her to be the only one close to him.

The only men that the village girls had in their social circles were rough and rowdy, making Rio's gentle and calm demeanor like a breath of fresh air. His handsome yet androgynous face only accentuated his allure even more.

Haha... They're definitely going to try to pry more out of me about Rio during work later.

Ruri smiled bitterly to herself; she could feel the silent pressure coming from the girls. She glanced at Rio to see him standing somewhat uncomfortably on the receiving end of all the girls' shy scrutiny. He shifted his gaze toward Ruri, seeking help with a troubled expression. Ruri was taken aback by the unintentional eye contact, her body shaking with a flinch.

...Hmph. He didn't even care about how I felt before.

Ruri recalled how Rio had seen her immodest morning attire earlier and pouted her lips as she blushed. She knew that it had mostly been her own fault, though. It was obvious that taking it out on Rio here wouldn't make the situation any better. She had mixed feelings about the storm of questions the girls would surely bombard her with later... but she just wanted to head home for now.

And so, she decided to rescue Rio.

"Come on, now, let's get these ingredients traded already. It's almost time for work!" Ruri snappily wrapped up the conversation and began to move around, trading for vegetables.

The girls all looked like they wanted to talk to Rio, but they couldn't find the right timing to do so. Ruri took that as a blessing and swiftly piled the vegetables into her basket. Once she had gathered all the ones that she needed, she turned to address Rio, who happened to be the one carrying the basket.

"Okay, all done. Let's go, Rio." She pushed his back to prompt him to move.

"Ah, that's right! Sayo!" Ruri turned back, remembering one last thing.

"...Huh?" Sayo was among the girls silently staring at Rio. Her body trembled with a start when her name was called, and she looked up in question.

"Granny wants you to come to our house with Shin. We're gonna have breakfast together," Ruri explained briefly.

"Eh... Ah, okay. Got it." Sayo nodded timidly.

“You’ll find out what she wants when we meet, I guess. See you soon!” With those parting words, Ruri hurriedly left again. Rio gave a small bow to the slightly confused village girls and trailed after her.



After the events at the village square, Rio returned to the village chief’s house and began to prepare breakfast. The village was low on dried meat and seasoning, particularly salt, so he dipped into the reserves of his Time-Space Cache to supplement his recipe. After all, there were enough ingredients and spices stored inside to last several years.

However, he hid the existence of the Time-Space Cache, as it was too troublesome to explain. He simply removed enough supplies to seem as though he’d retrieved them from his backpack instead. It was still a fairly large amount of meat and seasonings, though — enough to make Yuba happy.

“This is wonderful. Dried meat is a luxury around here, and we have very few opportunities to buy salt, so there’s never enough. Are you sure it’s all right, though? This many ingredients wouldn’t have been cheap, no?” Yuba asked hesitantly.

“I don’t mind,” Rio replied, shaking his head gently. “There’s no point in letting it go to waste, so please accept it as rent for my stay. I’m going to make breakfast with this now... Enough to serve five people, is that right?”

“Yes, Sayo and Shin will be coming later. Thank you. Ruri, go stand with him and watch.” Yuba saw them off as Rio and Ruri went to kitchen together.

Since they were going to be living together from now on, they needed to find out how good Rio’s cooking skills were. He would prepare the food alone, and Ruri would act as his judge.

“The firewood’s already been prepared — I’ll show you where later. All the kitchen tools and tableware are in that cupboard. If there’s anything else you need to know, feel free to ask.”

“Okay. What should I do about water? I can generate it with spirit arts if needed.”

“Ah, you can use the water in that jug there. Either Granny or I will use spirit

arts to refill it once a day, but I guess you can use spirit arts too?” Ruri asked with raised eyebrows. Spirit arts were more commonplace than sorcery and magic in the Yagumo region, but the number of users there was fairly small.

“...Yes. So, you two can use it too...” Rio’s eyes widened a little in surprise.

“Yeah. Our family line has always had a really high aptitude for spirit arts, despite the fact that we’re commoners. That’s part of the reason why Granny’s the village chief. Other than me, Sayo and her older brother Shin also have the ability to use spirit arts, so we’ve all been learning together since we were young.”

“I see... So that’s how it is.” Rio nodded in understanding.

When compared to elves, dwarves, werebeasts, and other spirit folk, humans generally had a low aptitude for using spirit arts. However, very rarely, someone with a high aptitude for using it was born. This meant that his father, Zen, could probably use spirit arts too, Rio mused to himself. It would have been nearly impossible for his father to make the harsh journey between the Yagumo and Strahl regions without them.

Rio found that information fascinating, but he couldn’t afford to let his goal fall to the back of his mind.

After using spirit arts to light the firewood in the kitchen furnace, he began to cook. The menu included rice, miso soup, meat, and a vegetable stir fry, along with the pickled vegetables Yuba had already made.

Incidentally, there were many seasonings available in Yagumo that were reminiscent of Asian foods on Earth — including both soy sauce and miso — which made it easy for Rio to recreate the taste of Japanese food. Rio had come across all kinds of ingredients and condiments during his time in the spirit folk village, but being able to collect those he hadn’t seen before in the Yagumo region made him feel a keen sense of satisfaction.

“...Hmph. I guess you’re pretty good, Rio,” Ruri muttered absently as she watched Rio prepare the ingredients with an experienced hand.

“Thank you very much. I have to be able to do this much, since I travel alone.” Rio shook his head bashfully.

“No, no, this isn’t just some average level of skill. Your knife-handling is even better than mine.” Ruri gave a slightly conflicted smile. The two of them continued to chat idly and opened up to each other, bit by bit. Less than an hour later, they’d finished cooking all of the food.

“Look, Granny. Rio made us a delicious-smelling breakfast!” With a cheerful grin, Ruri carried the completed dishes into the living room and served them on the table.

“Oh? This certainly looks nice. It seems we’ll have no problem leaving Rio on cooking duty.” Yuba broke into a surprised smile at the sight of the dishes lining the table.

“Umm, excuse me.”

A cute feminine voice could be heard from the entrance, where the door was left wide open. There stood Sayo and a boy standing behind her; he was around Rio’s age.

“Ah, Sayo. Welcome. Come in, come in. You too, Shin.” Ruri waved the two of them inside with a smile.

“O-Okay. P-Please excuse the intrusion.” Sayo gave a polite bow and timidly stepped through the doorway.

“Yeah, excuse us.” Shin followed after her.

“Good of you two to make it — you’re just in time for breakfast. Come on up.” Yuba summoned the two of them closer as Ruri returned to the kitchen.

“Thanks, Gran, for feeding us breakfast.” Shin thanked Yuba and lowered himself onto a cushion by the fireplace.

“Thank you for the meal, Lady Yuba.” Sayo sat down too and bowed her head. However, she seemed rather nervous as her eyes glanced around the room. That was when Rio came out of the kitchen, carrying more dishes.

“Good morning, Sayo.”

“G-G-Good morning, Sir Rio. Is there anything I may be able to help you with?” Sayo asked nervously, offering to help.

“...No, it’s fine. We just finished serving it all. All that’s left to do is eat.” Rio

gave pause at how Sayo had addressed him, then put on a smile and shook his head. In the meantime, Shin was curiously watching Sayo's peculiar behavior.

"Rio, Ruri, you two come sit down too," Yuba ordered. Both Rio and Ruri took their seats.

Everyone settled down in a horseshoe shape around the table, with Yuba sitting at the center. Ruri and Sayo sat at her sides, while Rio and Shin sat beside them. Sayo gave a polite bow to Rio, who sat diagonally opposite her, making Shin shoot a suspicious glare between them.

"This is Rio and Shin's first time meeting, yes? Shin, this boy is named Rio. He's the son of an old acquaintance of mine. He'll be staying in our house for a while. Rio, that's Sayo's brother, Shin."

An indescribable mood threatened to settle in the room, but Yuba ignored it as she casually introduced Rio and Shin to each other.

"My name is Rio. It's nice to meet you." Rio pasted on a sociable smile and bowed at Shin, who sat directly opposite him.

"...Right. You too," Shin replied rather bluntly, seemingly wary of him. Sayo, who sat beside him, looked like she had something to say.

"All right, Rio went through all the trouble of making this meal, so let's eat it before it gets cold. We can talk more after," Yuba suggested. Then, as their gazes gathered on the plates in the middle of the table...

"Hey, Gran... This stir fry has meat in it. Isn't that a bit fancy for breakfast? Did you pocket some extra for yourself because you're the chief? How sneaky!" Shin's eyes immediately locked on to the pieces of meat in the vegetable stir fry.

Meat was a luxury that couldn't be eaten in the village very often. They kept cattle, but not for consumption — the cattle in the village were valued for their labor, and were used for things like transporting goods and plowing the fields. The only occasions where they could eat cattle meat was when the work cattle were disposed of from injury or old age, or when the distribution of hunting spoils came around to each family.

"There's no need to panic. I haven't been sneaky — this is meat that Rio

brought with him,” Yuba explained with a wry smile.

“Oh, so that’s what it is. Well, as long as I can eat meat, I don’t care. ...Hey, this is good!” No sooner had he heard the explanation, Shin was shoving the stir fry into his mouth and complimenting the taste with rounded eyes. He gulped down some rice while the flavor of the stir fry was still in his mouth.

“Mind your table manners, Shin,” Sayo warned.

“Never mind that — you try it too. It’s so good. Ooh, this miso soup is great too!” Shin didn’t seem to care at all about Sayo’s warning as he dug into the meal with vigor.

“Geez...”

Sayo pouted her lips unhappily, but the moment she tried the stir fry her eyebrows rose in shock at the taste. “It’s delicious!”

“Right?” Shin said with a smug nod.

“The miso soup is delicious too. D-Did you really make all of this yourself, Sir Rio?” Sayo asked with a hint of envy.

“Yes. I’m glad the taste is to your liking.” Rio nodded with a faint smile.

“Ahaha, they both said what I wanted to say. It’s really good, Rio.”

“Indeed, you have quite the skill. Very impressive.”

Ruri and Yuba both agreed with smiles tugging at their lips.

“Thank you very much. I made extra rice, so feel free to get seconds.”

“Whoa, seconds! Thanks, Sayo.” Shin turned to Sayo next to him and offered out his empty bowl.

“Goodness, Shin! Have a little restraint!”

“Sayo, there’s no need for me to hold back. I’m a growing child, so pile on as much as you can.”

“I-I’m sorry, Lady Yuba. My brother is... Just... Thank you for the meal.” Sayo bobbed her head at both Yuba and Rio, then started to scoop rice into Shin’s bowl from the pot next to her. Once she returned the full bowl back to her brother, she returned to eating.

Everyone ate the breakfast Rio cooked with gusto. Then, once they had finished eating and poured a round of tea for everyone...

“Now that we’re no longer distracted by the delicious meal... Shall we get to the main point? Shin,” Yuba addressed the boy.

“Hm, what is it?”

“I called you here for a reason. I’d like to have Rio try out the work that the hunters do. Could you take him to Dola’s place after this?”

“...Huh? This guy as a hunter? Are you serious?” Having completely forgotten that Yuba had called him here for something, Shin’s delightfully full and satisfied expression turned dubious at her words.

“I am. He said he wanted to help with work in the village, so I asked him what he could do. He has quite a versatile set of skills, including the ability to hunt. Dola was looking for more people to help out, no?”

“That’s... true, but... It’s a really rigorous job, you know? Does he have the stamina? He looks pretty fragile,” Shin said, looking at Rio doubtfully.



“It’s all right — he’s not the type to lie. I’ve already confirmed that he can cook and use spirit arts, after all. He’s been traveling around the world at a young age all alone, so I have a feeling he’s quite the expert already. He has a very fine weapon on him, too... He might even be stronger than you,” Yuba said with a grin, provoking Shin.

“S-So what? I can use spirit arts too. We’ll see what you’ve got.” Shin wavered for a moment, before putting on an air of composure.

“Well, that’s the situation. I’m counting on you to explain that to Dola. Have a look at Rio’s skills — if it seems like you can spare the time, choose one of the younger juniors and assign them to train him.”

“Fine, fine. Better hope he doesn’t waste too much of our time,” Shin muttered with an unhappy nod, clearly underestimating Rio.

“Shin!” Sayo scolded him, having picked up on what he had meant.

“All right, all right. You’re so noisy. Hey, Rio. We don’t have much time, so let’s get going.” Shin stood up and walked briskly over to the front door.

“S-Sir Rio, I’m so sorry! My brother needs to watch his mouth more.” Sayo hurriedly bowed her head at Rio, but he gave her a gentle smile and shook his head, as though he wasn’t bothered at all. Then, he followed hastily after Shin.

“Good grief. Rio’s the younger one by a year, yet so much more mature. Don’t worry about it, Sayo... I’ll have a word with Rio later,” Ruri said with an exasperated sigh.

“O-Okay.” Sayo nodded timidly.

“Now, Sayo... And you too, Ruri. It’s your turn next,” Yuba said.

“Huh? Us too?” Ruri gawked in surprise, not expecting to be addressed.

“Yes. Rio has only just arrived in this village, after all. He might seem like he’ll be fine because of his calm demeanor, but there is a lot he is still not used to. There will be many villagers wary of his status as an outsider. So, could you two please look out for him?” Yuba said in a serious tone and bowed her head deeply at the two girls.

“Y-Yeah. Of course we will. Just leave it to us.” Ruri was taken by surprise at

the rare sight of her grandmother lowering her head like this, but immediately nodded with a smile.

“I-I’ll do my best, too, if it’s within my abilities!” Sayo nodded enthusiastically.

“Hmm, can I just think of him like a new little brother of mine? Or an older brother to Sayo? She already has Shin, though,” Ruri said while she stretched her neck.

“I-I can’t possibly dare to imagine Sir Rio as my older brother!” Sayo interjected fearfully at Ruri’s words.

“Ahaha... By the way, what’s with calling him ‘Sir’ Rio?” Ruri asked with a mocking smile.

“Eh? W-Well, don’t you think he kind of seems like nobility? Like someone unreachable...” Sayo faltered, replying with a slight blush to her cheeks.

“I see...” Ruri watched Sayo with a grin.

“W-What is it, Ruri?”

“It’s nothing. Now, shall we get to work? We’re heading off, Granny!” Ruri swiftly stood up and ushered Sayo toward the door.

“Ah! H-Hold on, Ruri!” Sayo struggled to keep up.

“Go on, now,” Yuba said, seeing the rushing girls off.

“...It seems like things will be quite interesting around here,” she muttered, smiling.



Shin led Rio to the foot of the forest mountain. Despite his crankiness coming out of the village elder’s house, Rio continued to engage Shin in conversation until they were chatting amicably, his sour mood long since forgotten.

“Right, here we are. This mountain forest is where we hunters do our work. We generally hide ourselves away in the forest from morning ’til afternoon, then help out in the fields with whatever free time we have afterward. If you want to know more, you should ask the master... Oh, speak of the devil. This is Dola, our boss.”

Shin was giving Rio a brief explanation of the hunters' work when the man named Dola — who had come up in the conversation with Yuba, too — appeared. He seemed to be in his late forties, with a large build and a sturdy frame.

“Yo, Shin — you're early. Is this the Rio kid, then?” Dola approached, greeting them casually.

“...What, you know about him already?”

“Well, yeah. My daughter met him this morning. Hm, I see... This is certainly... He looks a bit delicate, but I can see why the girls would go crazy over him. Well, not as crazy as they do for me. Wahaha!” Dola laughed heartily.

“It's nice to meet you — my name is Rio. I'll be staying in this village for a while, so I've come to help the hunters with their work on the orders of Lady Yuba. I look forward to working with you,” Rio said, introducing himself and giving a simple overview of his circumstances.

“Right, same here. So, do you have any experience in hunting?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Oho? I'm glad to hear that. We actually had two other hunters, but they're both injured right now. The only hunters that can work are this apprentice, here, and myself.” Dola said with a happy smile.

“That old lady Yuba said if it seemed like you had the hands to spare, to bring a younger guy from the village and train him as a junior. In any case, we'll see how he goes,” Shin interjected with a slightly amused look on his face.

“Why are you acting all smug for? You're still half a man yourself,” Dola said exasperatedly.

“S-Shut up! I'll hunt something way bigger than him!” Shin snapped back with motivation.

“Yeah, sure, I look forward to it. Just don't go overboard.” Dola gave a light shrug of his shoulders. “Now, I want to know exactly how talented Rio is. Our spare hunting equipment is stored in that shed over there, so let's head into the mountains as soon as you're ready,” he said with a shift of his attitude that

indicated he meant business.

After that exchange, they all gathered inside the shed and prepared to go hunting. Dola and Shin had been wearing work clothes that were easy to move around in, but they changed into thicker clothes and boots that they needed for traveling up the mountain. Then, they put on a straw overcoat, and equipped themselves with a hunting knife and bow each.

Meanwhile, Rio had been wearing his slightly thicker battle armor to begin with, and had daggers and throwing knives in his belt already, so he decided that all he needed was to borrow a bow.

“That’s a real strange getup you’re in, there. You sure you’ll be fine in just that?” Once Shin finished changing, he looked Rio up and down with skepticism.

“Yes, these are my traveling clothes, so they’re made to be very durable,” Rio nodded.

Dola came over to inspect the texture of the clothes. “So it seems. The fabric seems pretty tough. Well, I’m sure this’ll be fine,” he said, giving his stamp of approval.

“All right. Let’s go already,” Shin said a little hurriedly and rushed out of the shed.

“Just so you know, that’s him being more excited than usual. You must’ve set fire to his competitive heart, Rio. Now, we should set off too.” Dola gave a short huff of laughter, a smile playing at his lips as he left the shed. Rio followed him.

“Now, Rio. There’s something I need to say before we enter the mountain,” Dola said once they were outside again.

“Yes? What is the matter?”

“It’s about that way of speaking of yours. You don’t have to speak so stiffly with us. It makes me itch. There’s no time to worry about manners when you’re in the middle of a hunt, after all.”

“That’s true... It’s just, it’s almost become a habit at this point, so if you ask me to suddenly drop it it’d be very difficult... And make me even more awkward than I originally was. But I’ll do my best.”

“Haha. Well, it’s not a bad thing. If you’re saying it’s easier for you to speak that way, then there’s no need to force yourself to stop. Okay, I want to test your skills and explain a few things, so let’s head into the mountains. Do you have any questions before we get started, Rio?”

“Just one. If you have any hand signals for communicating without speaking, could you teach me them beforehand?”

“Hand signals? What are those?” Dola and Shin both curiously tilted their heads.

“Movements you make with your hand to communicate your intentions without saying anything by giving meaning to a gesture. Something like move forward, freeze, or be silent, for example.” Rio explained.

“Ah, I see. Now that you mention it, we do use some gestures to give really simple instructions. But, the specifics of what to do and where are a bit vague, so we don’t really have a set of fixed gestures with meaning.” Dola came to the realization he had been using hunting hand signals regularly without really thinking about it.

“But... Is there a point on deciding things like that? Who cares as long as you understand? Things like ‘go’ and ‘stop’ you can tell by the mood and some simple pointing.” Apparently, Shin had yet to understand the importance of hand signals.

“There *is* a point. If you don’t decide the rules of communicating beforehand, you may end up being even more confused. When you want to communicate something more complex, you’ll be stuck.”

“Hah... I guess Rio has a point. All right, seems interesting. If you insist on it that much, then you must have your own gestures for when you’re hunting. Teach us those.” Dola seemed to accept Rio’s explanation, showing ready willingness to implement the use of the hand signals to communicate during hunting.

“Well, if the boss says so, then I guess...” Shin agreed. And so, Rio taught some simple sign language to the two of them. Then, several minutes later...

“All right. We’re a little bit behind schedule, so let’s head out! The two of you,

follow me.”

Under Dola’s leadership, they finally departed for the village hunting grounds in the mountains. Dola lectured Rio on the village rules of hunting as they walked, but they eventually ran out of things to talk about and began to actively communicate through hand signals instead.

As an experienced hunter, Dola’s adaptability meant he was quick on the uptake; he mastered the sign language Rio taught him without delay.

Shin still has a ways to go, but Rio is handling him wonderfully. He said he had experience... That’s impressive for a frail appearance like his. But, he doesn’t seem like he’ll have a problem. If he proves himself with his hunting abilities, then he can work by himself from tomorrow onward.

Dola smiled wryly. Shin’s hunting attitude was still far too reckless, and he would often miss the hand signals Dola sent. In contrast, Rio’s abilities were worthy of high praise.

The way he silenced his footsteps, the way he concealed his presence, his ability to spot traces and trails of their hunting prey, and his knowledge of the animal’s behavior — no matter how you looked at it, Rio was adept at everything.

And so, Dola and Rio naturally split the search for hunting prey between them, moving in a two-top formation with Shin trailing after them, which he was not pleased by in the least. Even though he regularly went out hunting with Dola, he had always been on the receiving end of instruction, and was never given responsibilities of his own. Yet, a newly recruited outsider like Rio — someone younger than him, no less — was being trusted and given a share of hunting responsibilities. It was almost as though he was being a burden to Rio. Perhaps Rio thought of him as a burden. And while the thought had never even crossed Rio’s mind, just the possibility of it made Shin feel overwhelmingly frustrated.

On top of that, Rio brought up his wisdom about sign language and had drawn Dola’s attention with it. In Shin’s eyes, Rio looked like he was trying to butter up Dola, making him even more distrustful than before. Eventually, his frustrations developed into irritation, leading to the inevitable distraction of his focus.

“Hey, Shin. What’s wrong? If you’re going to slack off, go home. You’re in the way.” Dola noticed his distracted demeanor and decided to warn him.

“...That’s not it,” Shin muttered sullenly, making Dola furrow his brows.

“There it is.” Rio said after he had already fired his bow. The arrow cut through the air with a *fwip!* It flew on a direct trajectory for their prey — almost as if it was being sucked in — and struck its target over twenty meters away, piercing a bird in a tree.

“O-Ooh, a Lenou bird! That’s a tough mark! These flighty birds get really nervous around others. Hunting them is difficult.”

“I’m sorry. I fired the arrow at my own judgment... The bird had noticed us and was about to take off otherwise,” Rio apologized, looking regretful.

“No worries about that. More importantly: your bow arm is amazing. There was barely any time between when you nocked your arrow and when you fired it. And at this distance too — what a sight!” Dola, letting his irritation toward Shin disperse, turned to praise Rio instead. Shin’s expression grew even sulkier.

“Thank you very much.”

Rio gave a short word of gratitude before hurrying over to the Lenou he had shot down. He grabbed it by the legs and pulled out a dagger with his free hand, slicing its neck to drain out the blood. He wore a serious expression as he worked, even offering a short moment of silence in appreciation for the prey that had been sacrificed for food.

Dola watched Rio toiling away with his familiar hand and let out an impressed sound. “Oho. Fine! We can’t lose either, Shin,” he said enthusiastically, urging Shin on.

“I know! As if I’d back down...!” Shin replied angrily. Dola saw right through his attitude and gave a wry smile in exasperation as he approached Rio.

After finishing up all the procedures that needed to be done right away, the party resumed their search for prey. Rio and Dola steadily took down wild birds and rabbits as they proceeded through the forest. The sight of their efforts lit a fire within Shin, who didn’t want to lose to them. However, he found himself unsuccessful, unable to catch a single animal.

Thus, time passed by until the early afternoon.

“Okay. It’s still a little early, but we can wrap things up here. The two of you did well — we have more meat that we’re bringing back to the village than usual,” Dola announced the end of the day with a pleased smile.

“I only got one, though. It was all you and that guy, boss,” Shin muttered, sulking slightly.

“What are you saying?” Dola asked, a tired expression on his face.

“This is the result of the three of us working together. You also helped in the cornering of the prey, Shin. Thanks to that, our arrows were able to land where we wanted them to.”

“That’s right. Cornering the prey is the important work of a hunter, too.” Dola agreed with Rio’s opinion, but Shin remained sullen, clicking his tongue before briskly walking down the mountain alone.

“Geez... He’s hopeless. Sorry, Rio. I’ll talk to him later, so just think of it as a brat’s tantrum. Don’t let it bother you.”

“...No, it’s fine. I’d like to apologize, too. If you could pass that on for me, I’d be grateful,” Rio apologized with a regretful expression.

“...There’s no need for you to apologize, but all right. Also, I reckon you’d be fine hunting on your own from tomorrow onward. I have to look after the juniors, so if you could hunt enough to cover my share, that’d be great. Do you think you could manage that?” Dola scratched his head with a guilty look, shaking his head as he spoke.

“Sure — leave it to me,” Rio replied smoothly.

“All right, I’m counting on you. Now, let’s get back to the shed and get to cleaning our kills.” Dola slapped Rio on the shoulder with a grin.



After they had finished cleaning all the animals, Rio took some of the meat and headed back home.

“I’m back,” he said into the house from the doorway, but there was no reply. There was no one in the living room, nor in the kitchen to the right of the clay

floor.

...Is no one home? Well, I guess it's still during work hours right now.

Rio decided to first get rid of the stench of wild animals that clung to him. There was no bathroom inside the house, so he took the bath bucket in the kitchen and went outside. He went around the back of the house and placed the bucket on the ground, then raised the ground that surrounded him with spirit arts to create walls to enclose the space. Then, he used spirit arts to fill the bathing bucket with water.

After that, he equipped the Time-Space Cache artifact he received from the spirit folk village onto his left hand and chanted the spell "*Dissolvo*." The air near his hand immediately began to distort, and four small metal bottles appeared in his palm. Each contained various soaps and detergents to wash his hair, body, and clothes. Naturally, they were made by the spirit folks.

Rio grabbed the bottles in both hands, took off his clothes, and climbed into the bath bucket. Then, he used his spirit arts to freely control the water and clean his hair and body with the soap.

It'd be much more convenient to have some kind of bathroom, even an outdoor one. I'll ask Yuba if I can build one later. We could even lend it to the other villagers to use.

After he had washed his hair and body, he went about washing the clothes he had been wearing that day. Several minutes later, Rio changed into spare clothes and returned the raised earth wall around him back to the ground. Then, he spotted Ruri and Sayo standing a fair distance away.

"...Oh, so it was Rio after all," Ruri let out a sigh of relief. A strange structure had been constructed behind her house while she was out, so it was only natural for her to be suspicious.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to startle you," Rio apologized with an apologetic expression.

"No, that's fine... Did you move the ground with your spirit arts just now?" Ruri asked curiously.

"Yes, that's right."

“Hmm. I’m not good at earth spirit arts, so I don’t really understand... but is it something you can manipulate that easily?” Ruri didn’t seem to accept Rio’s smooth answer, so she turned to ask Sayo beside her.

“I-I don’t know. I’m not good at earth spirit arts either... But compared to what I can do, it doesn’t seem like something simple...” Sayo offered her own opinion uncertainly.

“...Well, it’s not that hard if you practice it a lot,” Rio noted. Since he wasn’t able to measure the level of the average spirit arts user in the Yagumo region, Rio gave a vague reply to avoid answering completely. He figured he should only explain as much as was needed.

“Well, whatever.” Ruri didn’t seem to be too bothered by that, and suddenly began walking forward. She came closer to Rio, twitching her nose as she sniffed the air.

“Hmm... But what’s this...?” Once she was directly in front of Rio, she stared up at his face.

Rio hesitated. “Erm, what do you mean?” he finally asked.

Sayo curiously approached as well, watching the two of them from a closer distance with a blush. “Huh?”

“I knew it! There’s a nice smell coming from Rio!” Ruri said, face brightening with a vibrant smile.

“...Oh, the stench of the animals we hunted was clinging to me, so I washed up.”

“Huh, so that’s why. It’s a really nice smell, though... Come smell it, Sayo.” Ruri gestured for Sayo to come closer.

“E-Eeh?! I-I’m fine! I can smell it from here just fine!” Sayo shook her head with a bright red face.

“There, there — there’s no need to be so shy.” Ruri ducked behind Sayo in a quick movement and pushed her forward toward Rio. Sayo continued to insist against it, but she wasn’t resisting with any particular fervor.

“Oh...”

Once she was right before him, her face was flushed red all the way to the tips of her ears. She looked down.

“See, doesn’t he smell nice?”

“Y-Yeah...” Sayo agreed in a nearly inaudible voice. Unsure of how he should appropriately react to the situation, Rio simply stood there with a forced smile on his face.

“Hey, Rio. What *is* this smell?” Ruri asked.

“I think it’s the soap.”

“Huh? Soap? You mean the soap you use to wash your body and clothes?” Rio’s answer made Ruri’s eyes widen in shock.

“Yes, that soap.”

“Huuuh? Why do you have soap, Rio?”

“Why? Because I made it myself, I guess...” Rio’s eyes widened at Ruri’s surprise, though it wasn’t unreasonable for Ruri and Sayo to react in such a way. While soap did exist in the Yagumo region, it was a luxury item. It wasn’t an easy thing for a commoner to lay their hands on, so vinegar was often used as a substitute.

“Y-You made it? Rio, you can make soap? Phew! In our village, Granny’s the only one who really knows her medicine, but even she doesn’t know how to make soap. Isn’t it amazing, Sayo?”

“...Yes, it’s amazing.” Ruri and Sayo both turned to look at Rio with gazes full of admiration.

“As long as you have the materials, it’s pretty simple. I’ll leave it in the house, so feel free to use it later. You too, Sayo,” Rio said, embarrassed. The two girls blinked blankly at him.

“Wait, what?! We can use them too?!”

“Of course. I’ll make some more when I have the time, so there’s no need to hold back on using it.”

“Wow, I can’t wait! Thank you, Rio!” Ruri and Sayo clapped their hands

together joyfully.

“So, why are the two of you here?”

“Oh, we saw Dola and Shin on the road just now, so we figured you must’ve come back, too. If you were going to wash yourself, you’d need hot water and firewood, so Sayo said we should come back and make sure you knew where to find those and how to do it,” Ruri said with a grin, looking at Sayo.

“Ah, no... I, umm...” Sayo struggled to find words in her embarrassment.

“So that’s how it is. Sayo, thank you for your consideration. I used my spirit arts to make the water, so I was fine.”

“Huh... Y-You used spirit arts to make the water?” Sayo asked with a look of utter disbelief. Ruri was surprised, too.

“Yes, I did. Is there a problem...?” Rio asked, wondering why the two girls were so shocked.

“Ah, no. It’s just that hot water is a lot more difficult to make with spirit arts than cold water.”

“...Oh, I see. There’s a trick to doing it... Shall I teach you sometime?” Rio offered casually.

“E-Eh, really?!” Sayo said, eager to accept his offer.

“Y-Yes.” Rio nodded, taken aback.

“Good for you, Sayo! You’ll have to work hard,” Ruri giggled with a smile, ruffling Sayo’s head.

“I’m counting on you,” Sayo said, bowing her head shyly at Rio.

Chapter 2: Passing Days at the Village

Two months passed since Rio began living in the village, and in that time, there was now no longer a single person there who didn't know his name, and the villagers generally viewed him favorably.

This was partially thanks to the village chief, Yuba, taking him in, and partially thanks to him bringing back huge hauls of hunting spoils on a near-daily basis. The meat supply of the village had never been greater, and Rio was actively working in areas other than hunting, too. Using the knowledge he had gained in the Royal Academy and the spirit folk village, Rio had contributed to improving the standard of life in the village by a tremendous amount.

For example, he built a bathhouse next to the village chief's home for the villagers to use, and distributed his homemade soap to every family in the village, to the immense approval of the women. Furthermore, by giving his advice on farming techniques and tools, he greatly increased the efficiency of the farm work, which gained the strong approval of the elderly villagers.

The rate at which the village was developing *was* a bit fast, but Rio felt no need to refrain from sharing his knowledge and technology.

The village also suffered from sanitary issues, which had already caused people to become sick, whereas casualties from famine could be blamed on poor harvests. Ruri's mother had passed away at a young age from such problems, and her younger brother was only four when he died from famine.

Thankfully, Rio had both the knowledge and technology to prevent such deaths.

He had only spent a short time there, but both Yuba and Ruri considered him a beloved member of their family. Yuba, of course, knew of his circumstances already, but even Ruri treated him like a dear brother.

Nevertheless, there was a reality that Rio had to face: his time here was limited, as he would someday leave the village. That was why, for their sake, he

wanted to make the village they lived in as comfortable as possible.

Rio's feelings and actions were also acknowledged by the villagers, helping him earn their trust. Recently, the women of the village had been increasingly requesting his assistance with repairing their furniture and homes, having deemed his carpentry skills worthy of praise. While there were other craftsmen in the village, they usually already had their hands full.

Today, Rio was helping a woman fix the cracks in her walls, which were letting in drafts of air. Sayo and Ruri lead him to the house in question. After Rio completed the repairs, the portly woman who requested his help spoke to him cheerfully.

"Oh, thank you — you've saved me. The drafts have been so cold lately... I tried to leave it to my husband, but he made it even worse, so I was at a loss. The village craftsmen kept putting me off, too."

"The nights are starting to get cold, after all. I'm glad I could be of help to you, Mrs. Ume. Please call me again if you need any help." Rio shook his head at Ume, showing it was no bother at all to him.

"Sure thing. That aside, you three are always glued to each other's sides, huh? The younger men are all green with envy, seeing you walk around with two beauties of our village, Rio." The woman grinned happily, looking at Ruri and Sayo who stood on each side of him as Rio laughed awkwardly, his smile forced.

"Oh, stop that, Mrs. Ume. Rio and I aren't like that," Ruri answered with practiced ease.

"Since you're using the singular, does that mean it's different for Sayo?" Ume asked, changing the target of her attention.

"...Eh? Ah, no, umm, that's..." Sayo flushed red on the spot.

"Ahahaha, Sayo sure is cute," Ume gave a hearty, booming laugh.

Similar conversations had been occurring a lot as of late, and Sayo would react in this way nearly every time. Those initiating the conversations would bring it up to her in anticipation of her reaction, clearly making fun of Sayo's innocence.

“Geez, get used to it already, Sayo. You should at least laugh it off like Rio,” Ruri said, then giggled happily.

“Uhh... I-It’s just...” Sayo glanced at Rio, but the moment their eyes made contact, she looked down in a fluster.

“Sayo doesn’t seem to be very comfortable around men, so try not to tease her too much. I’d be grateful if you went a bit easier on me, too. I don’t really like these kinds of conversations,” Rio said in support of Sayo.

“Hmm... In Sayo’s case, it’s not that she’s uncomfortable around men, really...”

“Right...”

Ruri and Ume looked at each other with a small sigh. The two of them looked back at Rio, who tilted his head in question.

“Well, at any rate, we’re so glad to have a boy like you here in our village. I was a bit worried at first when I heard there was an outsider in Lady Yuba’s house, but I’ll be relying on you a lot more from now on!” Ume said brightly, changing the topic. She patted Rio on the shoulder.

“It’d be my pleasure to help wherever I can.” Rio nodded bashfully.

After that, Ruri and Sayo continued to lead him to other houses that had furniture that needed to be fixed. Similar exchanges occurred wherever they went, but the blush on Sayo’s cheeks was a story for another day.

Rio and the two girls were walking along together once they were on their way home.

“Really, though — Rio sure has a lot of skills. You’re clever, you can cook, you can hunt, and you’re skillful with your hands. Not to mention the spirit arts! Every village would want someone like you,” Ruri said, nodding as she spoke.

“I’m just a jack of all trades but a master of none. None of my skills can hold a candle to a true master.” Rio shook his head with a bitter smile.

“That’s not true! Sir Rio is amazing! The villagers all opened up to you instantly because you’re so friendly!” Sayo interrupted from beside them.

“Sayo’s right, you know. Having you here has really helped us out. We’re so

grateful having someone who can do pretty much everything in this village.”

“Thank you very much. I’m glad I’ve been able to assist in this village,” Rio answered embarrassedly, a somewhat happy smile tugging at his lips.

Then, at that moment, Rio and the girls came across some of the young men from the village, walking on the road as well. Sayo’s older brother, Shin, was among them. When Shin and the other boys saw Rio, their faces furrowed in displeasure.

“Are you lot together again? Rio aside... Ruri, Sayo. What happened to work?” Shin asked with a frown.

“We’re helping Rio with his work. Do you have a problem with that?” Ruri replied.

“...His work? What were you doing, Sayo?” Shin looked to his sister for a reply.

“Erm... Repairing furniture and homes. The craftsmen of the village are all occupied with building new residences, so Sir Rio is helping fix the smaller things.”

“Tch, you’re even doing that now?” Shin clicked his tongue. Sayo looked at him with a sullen expression.

“If you don’t have anything to say, then we’re going to go now. I’m tired, and I want to rest. Let’s go, you two.” Ruri urged Rio and Sayo to quickly leave the others.

Shin called after them to stop. “Wait. You can do your best sucking up to everyone, but we won’t accept you!” he said, prompting the other boys around him to agree.

“That’s right!”

“Yeah!”

“...” Rio hesitated for a brief moment. He was aware of the fact that his existence was having an impact on the lives of Shin and the other boys, making him question as to how he should react. Should he say something to them directly, shrug them off, or ignore them completely?

There were people in closed-off village communities that believed in excluding outsiders from their society, and Rio didn't think those kinds of sentiments were wrong. He knew that they could sometimes lead to stability and peace.

In other words, he felt a sense of guilt when it came to Shin. However...

"Good grief — you're such rude brats. Rio, don't give them any thought. You're already a wonderful member of our village, okay?" Ruri asserted herself bluntly and took a step forward to defend Rio.

"Ruri's right! You're being awful, Shin. Lady Yuba approved of Sir Rio's stay in this village, and he's been helping out with work this entire time!" Sayo agreed with Ruri.

However, seeing the two cute girls of the village stand up for Rio only made the boys even more unhappy, and their resistance to Rio rose above all sense of reason. Shin was particularly familiar with Sayo's personality, so he knew she wasn't the type to defend someone so angrily and place herself in the firing line. It left him feeling greatly shaken.

"Y-You shouldn't fawn over a weakling like him, Sayo!"

"I-I don't fawn over him!" Sayo hesitated for a moment, then quickly denied it.

The two glared at each other darkly, a tense air flowing between them. Just as Rio was thinking the situation was taking a bad turn...

"Shin, are you misunderstanding something? Rio isn't a weakling by any means. Despite his appearance, he's actually quite muscular. Right?" Ruri said, suddenly clinging to Rio's upper arm. The boys widened their eyes in blank shock.

"Hah? W-Wha— Y-You, and him... How indecent!" A beat later, Shin seemed to have clued in on something. His face turning bright red.

Sayo was also blushing. "W-Why are you aware of that, Ruri?"

"Hm? I don't know what conclusions you're all jumping to, but cool your heads. Not to mention how much better Rio is than Shin at hunting, too. Now,

let's go, you two." Ruri stuck her tongue out at the boys before dragging Rio off by the arm. On Rio's other side, Sayo hurriedly followed after them.

Shin had frozen where he stood in embarrassment, wincing slightly as Sayo shot him one last glare when she passed by.



That night, in the garden of the village chief's house illuminated by the moonlight, Rio was working hard at swinging his sword and working up a sweat that flowed down his shirtless back.

He repeatedly swung his sword, making sure the sensation was carved into his body. His breath was coming out slightly harsher than usual, and each time he swung the sword, his sweat was sent flying. Occasionally, the wind would blow the cold night's fog through the air, wrapping Rio's flushed body in a cooling embrace.



The sounds of insects could be heard echoing around him, and the plants rustled in the wind to form a symphony with the sound of the movement of Rio's sword. It was such a pleasant feeling that he almost wanted to keep training forever — but with dinner waiting for him, Rio finished revising his sword movements and moved onto his body formation next.

Around ten minutes of moving his body later, Rio came to a sudden stop.

"This isn't interesting to watch, is it?" he called out with a wry smile to Ruri and Sayo, who were standing by the doorway and silently watching on. Sayo's body flinched.

"Ahaha, so you noticed us after all? Is that what they call martial arts? Your movements were so graceful, I couldn't help but watch," Ruri said, giving a carefree smile.

"It's just my daily training," Rio replied with a strained smile.

"No, no, it's really impressive. I can't believe you can keep at it without getting bored. You've done it every day since you came here," Ruri said with earnest admiration.

"Huh? You do this every day?" Sayo's eyes widened in surprise.

For the record, she was here because she felt too awkward to go home and face Shin after their earlier squabble, so Ruri forcefully dragged her with them. Rio had briefly wondered about what Shin would eat for dinner, but Sayo reassured him there were leftovers from breakfast.

"Yup, he does this at least once a day around this time. Amazing, right?" Ruri gave a small shrug.

"Yes, it's amazing..."

"By the way, I've always wanted to ask. Why did you start learning martial arts, Rio?" Ruri suddenly brought up her question, figuring it was a good opportunity to do so.

"Why, you ask?"

"Yeah. I don't really understand martial arts, but even to my amateur eye, I can tell your training is impressive. Not everyone can put in the amount of

effort to reach that level.”

“Let’s see... It’s a little embarrassing to say since it’s so simple, but I think any young boy would have the same reason,” Rio replied with a grin, having carefully considered his answer.

“Eeeh, what’s with that?! I’m so curious! Don’t you wanna know, too, Sayo?”

“Y-Yeah. I want to hear more.”

Ruri and Sayo were both brimming with curiosity.

“Ahaha... What to do. May I put on my clothes first?” Rio gave a wry smile before picking up his towel and clothes he had left to the side.

“Huh? Ah, yeah. Sorry, sorry. Go ahead,” Ruri replied a bit shyly, though she hadn’t really cared since they were both cloaked in the darkness of the night.

Sayo only noticed after Rio’s comment, too, making her suddenly flush red and look down. Rio took that chance to quickly wipe his sweat off and throw a shirt on.

“All right, now that you’ve got your clothes on, tell us already! Why did you start learning martial arts?” Ruri pressed for an answer. Having calmed down, Sayo approached Rio to make sure she didn’t miss anything.

Rio gave in to their demands, and began to tell his story. “It’s just from when I was a child, okay?” he said, as though he were ashamed.

“Back then, there was a girl I liked... I wanted to become stronger so I could protect her.”

“...Huh. You had a girl you liked, Rio? That’s kind of unexpected. Wait, does that mean you don’t like that girl anymore?” Ruri asked with wide eyes.

“...It doesn’t mean I hate her or anything, it’s just that we’re estranged. She might have a lover already, or she may not even remember me...” Rio spoke with a smile and a small huff of laughter, but his gaze seemed distant.

“Sir Rio, you worked so hard for that girl... Won’t you have a chance to meet her again?” Sayo asked timidly, looking closely at Rio’s expression.

“I don’t even know where she is. The last time we met was a long time ago.”

Rio shook his head slowly.

“But, if she’s alive, you may meet her again someday, Rio. All your efforts might pay off,” Ruri said in a bright voice, wanting to uplift the gloomy atmosphere.

“...You’re right. And, well... Now I’m training for my own sake.” Rio nodded and gave a vague smile.

Ruri and Sayo looked at each other. “Really?” They asked together.

“Yes. It’s partly because I’m scared of losing something I’ve spent years cultivating, but I also need to be strong in order to travel alone. You can only fight the unreasonable with raw power itself.” Rio lightly formed a fist, speaking in a stiff voice.

“Is it really that dangerous? Traveling alone...” Sayo asked hesitantly, noticing the air around Rio tensing up.

“Yes. There are dangerous animals and dangerous people.” Rio seemed to be aware of how he had stiffened up, and answered with a softer tone to his voice this time.

“That’s... true...” Sayo nodded weakly.

In this world, a person’s life was a fragile thing. People died from illness and famine. People died from war. People even died from being attacked by wild animals and bandits.

That was why it wouldn’t be strange for Rio to be attacked during his journey alone, and it wouldn’t be strange for him to defend himself by killing them. That was the first thought that came to Sayo’s mind.

However, she was too scared to know the truth, so she didn’t ask any more than that.

“Sorry for talking for so long. You two must be cold. Shall we head inside?” Rio changed the subject, making a suggestion with a bitter smile.

“Yeah, let’s. I came to call you because dinner was done, but I completely forgot about it.” Ruri agreed with a laugh. Sayo also smiled, giggling.

“Oh, that’s right. Do you want to bathe together after dinner, Sayo? In the

bathtub Rio built. You still haven't tried it, right?" Ruri offered.

"Can I really? It was only just built recently, so the wait list was really long..."

The small bathhouse Rio had constructed was currently the talk of the town, with many villagers all wanting to try it. As a result, a wait list had been formed.

"It's fine, it's fine. We lend it out to whoever wants to use it, but it's still our bathtub in the end. Residents of the house and their guests can enter it at any time," Ruri said smugly.

"Okay... Then — yes, please. Thank you very much, too, Sir Rio." Sayo had been a little hesitant about receiving any kind of favorable treatment, but she lost to the temptation of the bathtub and ultimately nodded. She bowed her head at Rio and Sayo.

"All right, it's decided! So, please make us some hot water later, Rio!" Ruri clapped her hands together in request.

There was a bath heater installed in the bathhouse to heat the water for the bathtub, but it was much faster to have Rio make the hot water with his spirit arts. And, more importantly, it didn't use up any firewood.

"Sure thing. Leave it to me," Rio said, nodding willingly.

"Ehehe, thank you! You can peep at Sayo when she's changing as a thank you," Ruri said teasingly.

"R-Ruri!" Sayo yelled with a bright red face.

"Ahaha, it's just a joke!" Ruri said, retreating while she laughed.

Sayo made eye contact with Rio right beside her. "Geez! ...Ah, Sir Rio, please don't peep at me, okay?" She pleaded in embarrassment.

"Of course I won't," Rio answered immediately, ever the gentleman.

...But if it was Rio, a little peek would be okay, Sayo thought.

Her cheeks immediately flushed right after — her heart seemed to be in a bit of turmoil.

Chapter 3: Turmoil

Several more months passed since Rio began his stay in the village. The harvest season for upland rice had just begun, and it was the busiest time of the entire year. At this time of year, even the hunters — who normally went hunting in the mornings — helped in the fields instead.

Of course, Rio was no exception.

At the moment, he was swinging his hoe with all his might as he plowed the field. The monotony of the activity had caused calluses to develop on both his hands. They had cropped up in areas that differed from the ones that appeared when he used his sword. However, in his life as Amakawa Haruto, he had helped on his family farm throughout all of elementary and middle school, so Rio was used to the actions required to plow the rice fields. The farmers of the village were in awe of him.

A faint feeling of grief would occasionally pass through him at the thought of his father and grandparents, but as he continued to work, he felt strangely at peace.

Then, after work had progressed past a certain point...

“Hey, it’s time for a break! Lunch is served — everyone gather around!” Ruri yelled loudly so that all the working men would stop.

The villagers usually had two meals a day — once in the morning and once at night — but during opportunities like this, the whole village would gather to have lunch together. Working all morning would naturally cause them to feel hungry, so all the men unanimously headed toward the village square where food was being distributed.

“Here’s your miso soup and pickled vegetables. You can take up to two onigiri per person. Also, Rio provided the salt, so make sure you all thank him!” Ruri informed the villagers that were lined up to receive food as she set the tables. All the women and family men wore pleasant smiles as they thanked Rio, who

was nearby.

“Hey. Make sure you all thank Rio, too.” The younger men tried to take the food gloomily and silently, but Ruri pouted her lips and reprimanded them. Sayo nodded in agreement from where she was setting the table beside Ruri.

The boys clicked their tongues and murmured a word of thanks to Rio, then hurriedly moved away and gathered in a group amongst themselves and filled their stomachs with onigiri. Their eyes widened in surprise at the taste when they realized how generously the salt was used.

“Well... I guess it’s better than in the past. They can at least say thank you, now. Sorry, Rio.” Ruri sighed in exasperation and apologized with a bitter smile as she looked at Rio beside her. He wasn’t moving to join the herds of people, but was waiting until the crowds had dispersed.

“It’s all right,” Rio said, giving a brief shake of his head.

“Okay, we should eat too before it gets cold. Everyone’s waiting, too,” Ruri suggested.

A small distance away, a group of girls were calling for Ruri.

“Okay. Then I will—”

“U-Umm! Sir Rio, would you like to eat with us? You wouldn’t be intruding at all!”

Rio had been looking around and thinking of joining a group of the elderly and older married couples, when Sayo stopped him in a fluster.

“Good idea — I’m starving. Let’s hurry,” Ruri agreed, and quickly moved toward the gathering of girls. Rio was apprehensive about being the only man in a group of the village’s young girls, fearing he would be antagonized further by the younger men of the village. However, Sayo was meekly waiting beside him to move together, so he couldn’t broach the idea of eating with anyone else in this situation.

Nonetheless, villagers who were older and married, like Dola and Ume, were sitting right next to the girls, so Rio reconsidered his thoughts and decided there was no need to concern himself.

“All right. Let’s go, Sayo.”

“Okay!” Sayo nodded happily.

Rio started to walk toward where the girls were with Sayo trotting along behind him.

Meanwhile, Ruri had already reached the others, and called for Rio in a joking tone. “Hurry up, you two!” she said, and the other girls joined in.

“That’s right — we’re tired of waiting already!”

“It’s not fair for Sayo to hog Sir Rio all to herself!”

And so on. They began to crowd around Rio and talk noisily.

“Hello, everyone. Haven’t you eaten yet?” Rio asked, noticing that the girls had yet to touch their own food.

“We were waiting for you. We can’t let Sayo monopolize Sir Rio all to herself, after all,” one smart girl said, shooting Sayo a playful look.

“I see. I’m sorry to have kept you waiting, then. Please allow me to join you.” Rio bowed apologetically and sat down at an empty place.

“I-I’m not monopolizing him! I just thought the food would taste better if we ate all together, so I was waiting for Sir Rio... Umm...”

Sayo had frozen in shock for a moment, but the embarrassment eventually welled up and caused her to object with a bright red face.

“All right, all right. Basically, Sayo wanted to eat with her Sir Rio no matter what. Got it.” The girl who had been teasing Sayo nodded in mock understanding.

“N-No! It’s not like that! ...Ah, no, that’s not it... it’s not that I don’t want to eat with Sir Rio...” Sayo had reflexively denied it, but she hurriedly attempted to take back her words and explain herself to Rio.

“It’s all right. I understand.” Unsure of how to react, Rio simply forced a smile on his face.

In the meantime, the girls were watching Sayo’s flustered disposition with pleased smiles.

“Now now, everyone. Go easy on her. Sayo’s nearly reached her limit,” Ruri said to the girls exasperatedly.

Sayo glared at all of the girls with a resentful look in her teary eyes. Yet, despite her gaze, she seemed more like a small, cornered animal, so there was no impact behind her expression. If anything, it just caused others to feel more protective of her.

It was *almost* adorable enough to make everyone want to tease her even more...

“Fine. Well, she’s not the only one who wants to eat lunch with Sir Rio. We all do,” the cheerful girl who had been teasing Sayo said innocently. The other girls nodded along in agreement.

“Thank you... I’m glad to hear that. But may I ask you to stop calling me ‘Sir Rio’? I’m not in any superior position deserving of that title, so it makes me feel rather awkward,” Rio said with a shy grin.

“Eeeh? But ‘Sir Rio’ kind of gives off this high class aura.”

“Yup, yup. It’s like you were raised differently compared to the other men in this village.”

“Right? As soon as you mention ‘Sir Rio’ to them, they get grumpy. How gross.”

“It’s hard to think of them as men, too.”

“Ahaha, don’t compare them! Sir Rio doesn’t deserve that dishonor.”

“You’re right. I’m sorry, Sir Rio.”

And so on — the girls continued to chatter energetically and noisily. Their conversation moved from one topic to the next, until they had completely forgotten about teasing Sayo and about Rio’s request. It seemed as though he’d have to endure being referred to as “Sir Rio” for a little while longer. His shoulders slumped.

Although, Rio really wasn’t one to talk, either, having been told by the girls many times he did not need to speak so politely around them. Perhaps this had leveled the playing field.

A bit further away from Rio and the girls, Dola and Ume were sitting together sipping at their tea, having finished their meals. Both were smiling pleasantly, watching Rio and the noisy girls talk excitedly amongst themselves.

“Hahaha, as expected of Rio’s good looks. It’s like looking at my old self.”

“Are you saying Rio’s like your old self? Don’t kid yourself.” Ume flatly rejected Dola’s statement.

“Hey, now. What makes you say that? I’m being completely serious here.”

“I absolutely do not recall ever marrying a man that gorgeous. It’s rude to even consider comparing Rio to you. What a joke, am I right?”

“Wha— Hey! What are you saying to your own husband?!”

“You’re complete opposites in both appearance and personality, and you were nowhere near that mature when you were young. I’d say you weren’t much different from the young boys that are jealous of Rio right now. Overflowing with brute strength, but with no knowledge of how to hunt properly.”

“Geh... You just keep running your mouth. W-Well, he *has* been traveling the world at his young age, after all. He must have gone through quite a few hardships himself. I admit, I may not have been as accomplished as him when I was young...” Unable to refute Ume’s words, Dola swallowed his words reluctantly and nodded.

“So you do realize it! Ah, but now that you mention it, there was another man in our village who was like Rio, too — and it wasn’t you, of course.” Ume said, looking up at the sky in the distance.

“Huh? Since when was there someone in our villa... Aah, *that* guy, huh?” Dola was about to deny there being another similar man, when he suddenly seemed to remember something. His expression turned faintly unpleasant, but nostalgic all the same.

“Even though you could never win against him, you were burning with a sense of rivalry. Just like Shin does right now.” Ume cackled with laughter.

“Shut up. You were rejected by that guy, too. He said he was leaving the

village to become a soldier.”

“All the girls my age confessed to him at the time. None of them succeeded, of course.”

“Figures. He wasn’t the type to settle for a woman from some country town like this,” Dola said, nodding with a beaming smile.

“Oh? It seems you have quite a high opinion of Zen after all.”

“Hmph. Shut up.”

“I wonder what he’s up to right now... Do you think he has a child yet?”

“Who knows. If he did...” Dola shook his head unhappily and bit his tongue out of a sense of discomfort.

“If he did?” Ume urged him to continue with a doubtful look.

“...If he did, then the kid would probably be around the age of the young folks in this village. That, or younger. Either way, that man isn’t coming back. There’s no point in thinking about it,” Dola answered bluntly.

“Well, I suppose you’re right.” Ume nodded a bit sadly.



One week later, when the bustle of the village harvests had finally settled down...

Rio was making his way home after finishing his work for the day when he ran into Yuba on the road, just before sunset.

“Ah, Rio. Perfect timing. I had something I wanted to ask of you. Let’s discuss it as we walk home,” Yuba said once they were within speaking distance, prompting them to resume their journey home together.

“So, what did you want to discuss?” Rio spoke up first.

“Yes...” Yuba nodded, before beginning to speak. “Whenever the rice harvesting season comes to an end, the kingdom dispatches a tax officer. Once they get here, they officially decide the amount of rice to pay for the annual land tax and we distribute the rest among our food supplies. Anything that’s leftover is taken to the capital to be sold. You know all this already, yes?”

“Yes, I’ve been told about it.”

“Good, that makes this simpler. We’re in the middle of deciding who shall be on the transportation squad, and I was thinking of asking you to escort them, since you have experience traveling alone. It’s rare that anything’ll happen, but I can’t say for sure that it won’t be dangerous. Are you up for the task?” Yuba asked cautiously.

“Sure, I don’t mind. I’d be happy to,” Rio immediately consented with a nod.

“That would be a great help. Sorry for troubling you.” Yuba smiled broadly, relieved of her anxieties.

“It’s no big deal. Something like this is no problem at all.” Rio smiled faintly, giving a small shrug of his shoulders.

“Thanks to you, life in this village has gotten so much better. All the villagers are very grateful to you. You’ve taught us how to create useful tools and use new techniques in our farming. At this rate, next year’s harvest will be huge, so you’ve truly been such a big help.”

“I don’t think anything has changed that dramatically, but your harvest rates should stabilize more than they did before.” The corner of Rio’s mouth curled up into a small grin.

“I look forward to it.” Yuba smiled pleasantly.

Then, as they neared the village chief’s house... “Take that back, asshole!” someone yelled loudly. It was coming from the direction of the house.

Rio and Yuba looked at each other.

“Is there a fight?” Yuba murmured suspiciously.

“I’m going to see what’s going on.” Rio prepared to jog ahead to the chief’s house first.

“Wait up, I’ll go too.” Yuba called Rio back, following him at a faster pace than usual. Thus, the two of them swiftly headed down the road toward the village chief’s house.



A few moments before Yuba and Rio arrived at the house, right outside, two groups of men were glaring at each other. One group was composed of the youths of the village — including Shin — while the other was a group of young men that Rio was unfamiliar with.

The village boys were winning in terms of numbers, but the opposing side had one person that was particularly large; he looked like he'd be quite formidable in a fist fight. Furthermore, hidden behind the youths of the village — as though they were being protected by them — were several village girls (including Sayo and Ruri) in light clothing.

It was possible that they were on their way to the bathhouse next to the village chief's house, or they had just come out.

"Who the hell do you think you are, Gon, walking around like you own this place?! You even had the nerve to march straight into the bathhouse," Shin said, glaring hatefully at the giant named Gon.

"Huh? I came to visit the village chief as a guest. There was a shed I didn't recognize just sitting there, so I went to investigate it. Since when did you even make a bathhouse? But, I see, so that was why..."

Understanding the situation, Gon directed a lecherous gaze toward the girls in their light clothing. The men surrounding him also had their gazes fixed on the girls as they smiled creepily.

"Don't look at them with your disgusting eyes!" Shin yelled.

"Why not? It's not hurting anyone. Who cares if we look — or is your woman among them?" Gon laughed at him condescendingly.

"My little sister is!"

"Oh? You have a little sister? Which one?" Gon inspected the group of girls closely. Sayo's frame shook with a start.

"Sayo, hide behind me," Ruri whispered, hiding Sayo behind her back, but Gon seemed to have gotten a clear view of her already.

"She's still a brat, but she's a pretty thing, ain't she? Why don't you introduce us, dear brother in law?" he said, grinning.

“Fuck you!” Shin raged, moments away from hitting Gon.

“Hold on, Shin! Don’t!” Ruri ran forward in a hurry, grabbing his arm to stop him.

“L-Let me go, Ruri! This asshole won’t stop until I teach him a lesson!”

“You can’t just let him stir you up so easily! It’d be a huge problem if you punched him over something as small as this! No matter how rotten he is, he’s still the son of another village chief. You don’t want to cause Sayo any trouble, right?!”

“Guh...” Shin relented weakly, his face flushed with frustration.

Gon let out a disappointed sigh and tried to provoke him further. “Aww, you don’t have to hold back just because I’m the son of another village chief, you know?”

Shin, however, kept his head down and stood his ground.

“Tch, coward.” Gon clicked his tongue, unamused. He fixed his attention from Shin to Ruri instead. “Well, whatever. Ruri, you’ve grown into a quite a beauty... I almost didn’t recognize you, there.”

“Yeah, right. So, what did you want with our village?” Ruri asked, easily brushing away Gon’s nonsense.

“Let me stay at your place. We were on our way to the capital to sell our village’s products when our cargo carriage broke down. It’ll take all of tomorrow to repair.”

“I understand wanting to repair your broken-down carriage, but why do you need to stay at our place to do that?”

“Because I’m a guest of your village, and the son of another village chief? I’d expect an appropriate reception.”

“Then we’ll lend you one of our guest cabins, so you can stay there instead. Unfortunately, we don’t have any spare rooms in our house to lend to you.” Ruri shook her head curtly and refused Gon’s demands.

“Hey, now. You shouldn’t treat your potential future husband so coldly, you know?”

“...H-Huh? Don’t spout such ridiculous nonsense! How disgusting!” Ruri held herself steadily, but Gon’s words made her body tremble.

“Oi, Ruri?! What does he mean?! Are you getting married to this bastard?!” Shin asked her in a panic.

“I have no idea what he’s going on about! Why would I marry someone like that?!” Ruri replied, as though it was her first time hearing this.

“Didn’t you know? The only heir of your village chief right now is Ruri. Which means... according to tradition, Ruri will be the next village chief. But since you have to get married and govern the village with your husband, you can’t stay unmarried as a village chief. That’s why I’m offering myself up as Ruri’s husband,” Gon said brazenly, with no trace of any shame.

“That’s bullshit! You can’t just decide that by yourself!” Shin, who had been out of the line of fire for a while, was unable to listen any further to Gon’s excessive statements and yelled out loudly.

“I’m not deciding, I’m offering. And it should be my freedom to offer myself up, no? Outsiders like you have no right to protest.”

“As a member of the village, I won’t allow it!” Shin yelled, and the boys around him echoed their agreement.

“That’s right!”

“Hah? None of you even have a claim on Ruri. What is this, collective jealousy? What a bunch of pussies.” Gon let out a mocking sigh.

“Take that back, asshole!” Unable to bear it any further, Shin took a swing at Gon.

“Let’s follow Shin!” the other boys yelled, breathing harshly through their noses. They’d lost their tempers, too.

“Ah, hold it, all of you! Shin! Stop right there!” Ruri tried to stop them, but her voice no longer reached their ears.

“Ha! Now it’s finally getting interesting. Come at me: I’ll show you how much more powerful I am!”

“Shut your mouth, you bastard!” Unaffected by their difference of stature —

he was at least 20 centimeters shorter in height — Shin sprung forward. His fist was on a collision course with Gon's face, but Gon easily grabbed the incoming punch. He looked down at Shin with a surprised expression.

"Oi. You use spirit arts, don't you? Is this the best you can do when you've strengthened yourself?" He didn't look like he was feeling any resistance from the fist at all.

"W-What the hell did you say?!" Shin became worked up and put more strength into his captured fist, but his arm didn't even budge, despite the fact that he was using spirit arts to strengthen his body.

"You're not even worth fighting," Gon muttered under his breath, extending his other hand to simply grab Shin by the neck. He then lifted Shin's body into the air as though it weighed nothing.

"Wha— Guh... Gah...!" Shin struggled in pain. He tried to tear Gon's arm away from him, but he couldn't even make it budge.

"S-Shin! S-Stop! Stop it, please!" Seeing her brother in pain made Sayo run forward in a panic. Her voice was shrill and her body was shaking slightly. When her eyes met Gon's, she timidly directed her gaze downward to avoid eye contact.

"Ah? Well, if you absolutely insist, then I wouldn't be against keeping him like this, I suppose..." Pleased with himself, Gon huffed through his nose and looked down at her triumphantly.

"That's enough! What are you all doing?!" Yuba's voice suddenly echoed over everything; she had finally arrived after hearing the commotion, with Rio in tow beside her. Gon clicked his tongue quietly and looked at Yuba.

"Hey. It's been a while, Old Lady Yuba. Sorry for the commotion — we were just bickering when this guy here suddenly tried to punch me," he replied, gaze fixed on Shin, who he still had by the neck.

"If you're sorry, then release him. I don't care if you're the son of another chief — any more fights in my village and I'll make you leave. No ifs, ands, or buts," Yuba said bluntly, locking her sharp glare on Gon.

"...All right, all right. I wasn't interested in puny punks like him anyway." Gon

released the hand he had around Shin's neck.

"Koff, koff... Ugh..." Shin's body collapsed, folding over in a coughing fit.

"Are you okay, Shin?!"

Sayo supported Shin's body in a panic. She placed her hands around his throat and cast a healing spirit art to soothe the pain. Several seconds later, Shin was able to breathe normally again.

"Y-You bastard..." he glared at Gon.

"Ha! You need your precious little sister to protect you? How pathetic," Gon sneered triumphantly.

"Stop it, you two! Shin, get out of here and cool your head," Yuba scolded.

"Guh..." Shin held back his words and hung his head in frustration. Sayo supported her brother by the shoulder and helped him move toward the back.

"C-Come on, Shin, let's go."

"I'll help you, Sayo." Ruri approached them and helped Sayo support her brother's body up from the other side.

After Shin had retreated, Yuba spoke to Gon, trying to settle the situation at hand. *"So, why have you come calling today? Don't tell me you're here just to pick fights."*

"We were just on our way to the capital to sell our village's products and decided to drop by, since our horse-drawn cargo carriage unfortunately broke down. I came to visit you, the village chief, to ask for permission to stay in the village in the meantime."

"And how did that end up causing a fight?"

"...That new shed over there piqued my interest. When we approached it, the boys from your village appeared and yelled at us. Which... then turned to this," Gon answered, shrugging his shoulders.

"Granny, we were all bathing at the time. One of the girls noticed they were approaching the bathhouse and screamed..." Ruri explained.

"I see. So Gon and the others were mistaken for peeping toms and ruffians."

Yuba nodded in understanding.

Gon denied the accusation without delay. “Just so you know, we weren’t aware that the shed was for bathing. I was just curious about the impressive little shed that wasn’t here last time.”

“Well, I’ll accept the fact you didn’t know what the shed was for. However, that does not excuse the fact that you trespassed onto someone else’s property to conduct your own investigation, uninvited.” Yuba analyzed the situation calmly.

Rio agreed with Yuba. Thinking there was no need for him to step forward, he had been watching silently from the sidelines.

“Tch. Well, I guess that part was my fault.”

Gon expressed remorse with a click of his tongue. He seemed to find Yuba’s control of the situation difficult to deal with, but he wasn’t about to take it lying down.

“You know,” he began. “Those guys were probably trying to peep on the women’s bath for real, don’t you think? Why else would they run into us so conveniently in front of the chief’s house? Am I right, Shin?” He set his eyes on Shin’s group with a grin.

“W-Wha?! N-No! We only came running because we heard Gon’s group had appeared in the village and were heading for the chief’s house! And Sayo said she was going to bathe!” Shin denied the accusation in a panic; he seemed to have recovered enough to speak, at least. The other boys also echoed their agreement after their shock wore off.

Yuba heaved a tired sigh. “All right, I understand now. Is there anything else anyone would like to add?” She asked everyone present.

No one spoke up.

“Then, this matter ends here. Gon, I apologize for how Shin’s misunderstanding caused the situation to grow out of hand. However, your actions were too rash and violent. I’ll allow you to stay in a guest cabin on the outskirts of the village, but you are forbidden from going out needlessly. Got it?” Yuba gave her ruling in a tone that didn’t allow for any further objections.

“Fine, whatever. Later, Old Lady Yuba.”

Gon gave an exaggerated sigh and started walking away, with his group of followers hurrying after his departing back. They made their way down the road Rio and Yuba had just come up from.

Hm? Was there someone like this in the village before?

As he walked, Gon noticed that there was someone unfamiliar standing next to Yuba — Rio. He narrowed his eyes and inspected the boy’s face. Rio returned his look with a cool stare, watching to see if Gon would try and start something else.

Hmph. With a refined face like that, he’s probably another pansy. I don’t like the look of him.

Seeing the way Rio stared back at him without hesitation made Gon furrow his brow slightly. But his expression immediately changed to a wicked smirk, as though he had suddenly come up with a fantastic idea.

Gon had been walking with his shoulders squared, but he suddenly directed his attention away from his destination. He feigned carelessness as he veered off-course and crashed into Rio at the last minute. Their upper bodies collided with each other.

“Oops, my mista—?!”

Gon, who exceeded Rio in both height and weight, recoiled as though he had walked into a wall. The unexpected impact made him stumble to regain his footing, and he widened his eyes in utter shock.

“A-Are you all right, Mister Gon? What happened?” One of the men walking behind Gon asked with surprise in his eyes. He couldn’t see what had happened from behind.

“Uh? Ah...” Gon was still a little dazed. He looked between his body and Rio’s in comparison, unable to comprehend what had occurred.

“I see that your muscles are quite toned, but it seems your long journey has made you weary. The sun will be setting soon; may I suggest you retire to your lodgings to rest?” Rio said eloquently, giving an insincere smile with no emotion

behind it at all.

“...Tch. Let’s go, everyone.”

Gon seemed to sense there was something strange about Rio, but convinced himself that it was just his imagination. That was how confident he was in his own physical strength.

With his followers in tow, Gon departed for real this time.

Once their party were completely out of sight, the young men and women of the village immediately relaxed all of their tension at once, and heaved a collective sigh of relief.

“Good grief. All this unnecessary ruckus,” Yuba sighed in exasperation.

“G-Granny. Shin and the others were just trying to protect us. So, umm, don’t blame them too much, okay?” Ruri tried to defend them in a hurry.

“I know that, of course. I figured the one that caused the commotion was probably that wild child. After his parents gave up on him, he never received any proper discipline, and only uses his craftiness to get by, so he’s quite the troublemaker. That being said, these boys were also at fault for getting worked up so easily.” Yuba glared at Shin and the others.

“Ugh...”

After being rash enough to land the first blow, not to mention being beaten on top of that, Shin and the others were left feeling guilty and unable to object to Yuba.

“For now, I want each and every one of you to go home without any more fuss. I forbade them from going out, but don’t let down your guard. Inform the others in your neighborhood, too. And make sure you let me know immediately if anything unusual occurs,” Yuba instructed, making everyone exchange glances before they agreed timidly.

After a while, the girls returned to the bathhouse to finish changing, then came back out. With their preparations complete, everyone started to move about and make their way home.

However, two people remained frozen where they stood. It was Shin and

Sayo. Sayo still seemed frightened after the events from before, as her body was still faintly trembling.

“What’s the matter? You two should get home too,” Yuba said.

“...Hey, Gran. I have a request. Could you please let Sayo stay at your place tonight? As you know, it’s just us living in our house, and I made a fool of myself earlier. Our place isn’t that far from where those guys are staying, so she’s probably feeling anxious too, so... She’d feel better if she stayed with Ruri and Gran and... *him*... I think.” Shin frowned in embarrassment as he bowed his head at Yuba. He snuck a glance at Rio for a second, but immediately tore his eyes away again.

Yuba seemed to be struck by this, as her eyes widened slightly. “Oh? What’s this? It’s strange to see such an admirable attitude coming from you, even if it is for Sayo’s sake. Did getting beaten up become a good lesson for you?” She laughed heartily at Shin.

“S-Shut up! I got too fired up before and caused some trouble, but that’s not it! Are you going to let her stay or what?!” Shin objected, blushing bright red.

“Sure, I don’t mind. You’re right, after all. Sayo, stay at our place tonight.” Yuba gave her permission and looked at Sayo, who was standing very still in fear.

“Huh? Ah... Is it really okay?” Sayo asked in a daze.

“It’s fine. Judging by your state, you would’ve been too scared to sleep alone anyway. Sleep with Ruri tonight. ...Oh, or did you want to sleep with Rio instead?” Yuba asked cheekily and nodded with a wry smile.

“...I-I’m fine! I’ll sleep with Ruri!” Sayo flushed, shaking her head furiously. She seemed a little bit more like her usual self.

“Is that so? Then, all right. As for you, Shin — you can stay here tonight, too. Gon may be harboring a grudge toward you in particular.”

“I... Fine, then. Thanks.” Shin hesitated for a moment, but nodded obediently in the end.

“Okay, we’ll need two more plates set for dinner tonight! Let’s get cooking,

shall we?” Yuba said, trying to brighten the mood, before going inside the house in high spirits.

“Right. Let’s go, everyone,” Ruri said, looking at the other three.

“I’ll help cook the rice!” Sayo offered eagerly.

“I have some business to attend to first, so please return without me,” Rio said, voicing his intention to stay outside.

“Huh? Business?” Ruri asked in confusion.

“I’d like to set up some security measures, just in case.”

“Hmm? Then, uuh... please do?”

“Yes, leave it to me.”

Ruri didn’t seem to understand, but Rio gave her a strained smile and nodded.

“Okay, then. We don’t want to get in your way, so we’ll head in first. You too, Shin.”

“...Yeah.”

Shin looked like he wanted to say something more to Rio, but walked away hesitantly at Ruri’s call.



That night, just as the villagers were having their supper, Gon and his followers were having drinks in the cabin that had been lent to them. Spread out on the floor before them was their dinner, along with various preserved side dishes; it was all bland, with no seasoning at all.

“It sure is boring around here, boss. Nothing interesting at all, just like our village,” a man of small stature said as he poured Gon’s drink for him.

“Well, the operation starts tomorrow at midnight. We have to lay low until then, especially since we now have a good reason to stay inside.” Gon chugged the poured alcohol with a grin.

“Haha. You’re amazing, boss. By causing a commotion in the beginning and laying low afterward, those idiots will lower their guard. It’s downright wicked,” The small man sitting next to Gon said.

“Well, it’s all so that I can have my way with Ruri, after all.”

“Haha! Ruri’s a beauty, but I think Shin’s little sister looked like quite the catch, too.”

“Hear, hear! I see you’re quite the hedonist, huh? Well, her face wasn’t bad, and the fact that she’s that bastard’s little sister makes it all the better. I suppose she’d be a good second priority after Ruri.” Gon heartily carved a perverted grin on his face.

“Let me have a taste of her too, boss.”

“Sure — if you’re OK with my leftovers.”

“All right!” As soon as Gon gave his permission, his followers cheered vigorously.

All the men present were considered questionable in the village they came from. The group consisted of second sons or lower — those who would never inherit their family businesses — that had banded together to follow the beat of their own drums. At the head of the group was their leader, Gon.

Gon was the son of their village chief, but like the others, he was a second son and had been raised as a spare ever since childhood. However, Gon was unable to sit back quietly and accept his role as a secondary human like the others.

Perhaps it was due to his education, or perhaps it was because he was still raised somewhat lovingly as a village chief’s son, but his personality developed into a clever and spoiled one as he grew up.

Gon’s body was well-built, he had a considerable amount of physical strength, and had the talent for spirit arts. His specialty was the spirit arts for physical ability and physical body enhancement — the worst possible combination. Since he was ten years old, none of the adult villagers could stand up to him, which made others treat Gon as an outcast.

Now, he was eighteen. At some point along the way, Gon started to gather second sons like him on his side, establishing his own power in the village. As of late, his influence in the village had grown so strong that not even the village chief could touch him. Even when he caused trouble, it was difficult to punish him.

Under normal circumstances, there was no way a group of hooligans like Gon would be selected for the trade squad going to the capital; however, the villagers were unable to refuse the demands of Gon's gang, ultimately allowing them the role of escorting the goods. They hadn't even noticed what the gang had been secretly plotting behind their backs...

Recently, the villagers had been trying to persuade Gon's gang into joining the kingdom's army, but Gon knew they were just trying to tactfully chase them out of the village. Because of that, Gon devised a plan for them to leave on their own terms.

However, the world wasn't so easy to live in that they could spontaneously leave their village with nothing but their group. They needed to secure their relocation destination in advance, along with food, clothes, and shelter.

That was when Yuba's village caught Gon's eye. If he became Ruri's husband, then he would become a legitimate village chief.

Yuba's village neighbored Gon's village, allowing them to interact fairly often, so Gon knew that Ruri was Yuba's one and only heir. It was truly a once in a lifetime opportunity that had fallen into his lap.

Most importantly, Ruri's appearance was Gon's type to a T.

Regardless, it was clear that if he went about his plan head-on, Ruri would reject him. The fact that Gon decided to try a more subtle approach without hesitation showed how twisted he truly was.

"We went through all that trouble of smashing the carriage, too. Better take our time repairing it tomorrow." Gon grinned with joy at the thought of tomorrow night.



The next morning arrived without incident, despite the fact that uninvited company had arrived the day before. So far, Gon and his gang had kept their promise, avoiding contact with the villagers and focusing on the repairs of their horse carriage. Since that was the case, the villagers cast Gon out of the forefront of their minds.

Although they had passed the peak of the harvest season, there was still

plenty of work for all the villagers to do; they had to start preparing large amounts of food to be preserved for the winter, and products had to be prepared to be taken to the capital, too. Because of this, the villagers had been bustling about energetically since early in the morning. By the time noon had passed, they had completely forgotten their wariness for Gon's group. As the sun slowly began to set, they wrapped up their work for the day and headed home.

Rio finished the work allocated to him rather early today as well, so he headed back home ahead of anyone else. Yuba was already home, so the two of them decided to rest for a short while before going about making supper. Then, just as the tea was poured, someone knocked on the front door.

"Is Lady Yuba present?" they called.

"I'll see who it is."

"Thank you."

Rio hurriedly stood up after urging Yuba to stay seated and moved toward the front door. He opened the door to see Ume standing there.

"Good evening, Ume. Can I help you?"

"Rio. Sir Hayate has arrived, so I'm here to inform Lady Yuba." Ume must have rushed over, as she was slightly out of breath.

"I've heard. I shall go meet him right away — is he at the storehouse already?" Yuba asked.

"Yes, along with his subordinates. I've told him to make himself at home in the spare guest cabins."

"I see. Good job, Ume." Yuba nodded, pleased. She changed into her outdoor shoes on the clay floor and moved to leave the house, but paused and turned back to Rio.

"Ah, that's right. Rio — sorry to ask this of you, but could you add five to six more servings to tonight's dinner? We'll probably have some people join us for a meal tonight. I may call one of the village girls over to help," Yuba requested.

"I understand... Leave it to me. Would it be better if the meal was a bit more

extravagant? If so, I could go and hunt something right now...”

“Ooh, could I ask that of you? That would be great — thank you. And you can help yourself to the vegetable garden if you run low on ingredients.” Yuba smiled cheerfully, thanking Rio for his willingness to help.

Then, with Rio seeing her off, she left at a quick-footed pace, while Rio quickly cleaned up the tea set and headed out to the mountain to hunt. Since he was short on time, he decided to use the spirit arts he usually refrained from using when he hunted.

Rio kicked off the ground at the foot of the mountain and rose into the air with his wind spirit arts, arriving at the hunting grounds in the blink of an eye. If the villagers had witnessed that, their eyes would’ve grown to the size of saucers, and their jaws would’ve dropped to the ground.

After spotting a Lenou bird flying through the air with his enhanced vision, Rio closed in on it from above and beheaded it in one swing of his sword. Catching its body by the legs, he went about draining the blood while he hovered midair.

One down.

Lenou birds were wary creatures that didn’t typically flock together, but they were much easier to hunt in the air when their guard was down. With that in mind, Rio immediately spotted his next prey flying a little ways off from his current location, and quickly set off after it.

His hunt continued to progress smoothly after that, and he was able to finish it all — including cleanup — before the sun had fully set.



After wrapping up the carriage repairs early and dumping the rest on their underlings and the villagers that had accompanied them, Gon’s gang were drinking away in the cabin that had been lent to them before the sun had even set.

Suddenly, the door to the cabin slammed open. All the gazes in the room shifted toward the door to see a boy in his teens standing there, panting.

“Hah... Hah...”

“Oh, what’s up? Has the carriage been repaired already?” A drunk Gon inquired heartily.

The boy was an underling of Gon’s gang and was often used to run errands for them, as he was the youngest of the group. He had been tasked with the supervision of the villagers repairing the carriage and helping out on Gon’s behalf.

“Ah, boss! This is bad! The tax officer is here in the village!” The boy yelled, causing the men around Gon to stir noisily.

Tax officers were special government officials. They were dispatched by the capital during harvest season to every village to collect taxes based on the amount of crops that were harvested. It was an official position that was given only to the most trusted people in the kingdom, and those who took on the role were masters in both literary and military arts. Calculations were required in order to conduct harvest inspections, and the officers had to have the strength to protect the collected tax from various dangers on the road. But, most importantly, they had to be people that wouldn’t abuse their privileges.

“...So what?” Gon asked in a sobered voice. He seemed to be aggravated that the mood of their drinking party had been ruined.

“N-No, it’s just, won’t the tax officer be staying at the village chief’s place? Even we can’t go up against a kingdom official. Maybe we should hold off on the boss’ plan...” the boy answered in a shrill voice.

“That doesn’t matter,” Gon replied unhappily and brought a cup filled with alcohol to his mouth.

The other men exchanged glances.

“But, boss. The tax officers are rumored to be really strong, aren’t they? There was once a guy who suppressed the uprising of a whole village single-handedly,” one of the men said hesitantly.

“Oh? Are you calling me weak?” Gon glared.

“No, of course not!” The man shook his head in a fluster.

“Besides, we’re going to head over once everyone’s asleep. Since it’s Old Lady

Yuba we're talking about, there'll probably be alcohol involved. Even if it's a tax officer, warrior, or just a peasant, once they're drunk and asleep, they'll be defenseless."

"Well, that's true... I-I guess you're right." Overpowered by Gon's brimming self-confidence, the men regained their nerves.

"Obviously. It's no different to what we've done before. Once our night crawling attempt is successful, Ruri will give up and accept her fate. If she protests, we'll just threaten her. Really, if we wanted to make sure it goes off without a hitch, we could just kidnap her and bring her with us. That might make things easier, too, no?" Gon said with a lecherous grin.

Led on by his words, the other men chuckled with sinister laughter.



Rio hurried home after his hunt, but no one else had returned yet, so he decided to wash off the scent of blood from his body first.

The main dish tonight would be Lenou; after washing up and mulling over various dish combinations for the menu, Rio headed toward the kitchen and finally got to work prepping ingredients. Before long, an enticing aroma wafted through the living room.

That was when Yuba came home, accompanied by a group of men, Ruri, and Sayo. The front entrance immediately became livelier.

"Welcome home," Rio called out to Yuba and the others from the kitchen, which was located on the right side of the clay floor.

"We're back. It smells especially good today." Yuba smiled broadly at Rio, returning his greeting.

"Yeah, it smells great! What are you cooking, Rio?"

"Let me help you, Sir Rio!"

Ruri and Sayo hurried into the kitchen to help.

"Indeed, this is quite the wonderful aroma... Lady Yuba, was that boy always a member of this village?" A young gentleman asked, peering into the kitchen from the clay floor and looking at Rio as he spoke.

“That is Rio, the son of an old acquaintance of mine. He’s staying in our village right now,” Yuba said. Rio left the stove to Ruri and Sayo for the moment as he ducked out onto the clay floor to greet their guest.

“Good evening. My name is Rio — pleased to make your acquaintance.”

“Hello. My name is Saga Hayate, and I am the tax officer visiting this village. Behind me are my aides. It is nice to meet you.”

“Same here.”

Rio and the gentleman named Hayate exchanged their greetings. Despite Hayate’s stiff features, he was a pleasant young man with a refreshing aura about him. He had a splendid single-edged straight blade at his waist and wore an outfit similar to a finely-designed samurai outfit.

Age-wise, he seemed to be a few years Rio’s senior.

For the record, it was custom in the Yagumo region to name yourself from your family name first, making Saga his family name and Hayate his first name.

Rio and Hayate bowed at each other, each examining the other young man’s center of gravity and posture. They secretly determined that the other was no ordinary person.

“Now, let’s not stand around all day. Everyone, please come up to the living room and have a seat. Dinner will be ready soon.” Yuba stepped up into the living and urged Hayate’s party to follow.

“Thank you. We shall gratefully accept your offer.” Hayate bowed deeply and removed his footwear before stepping up into the living room.

“I shall return to the kitchen for now. Please excuse me, Yuba.”

“Yes, please do.” Yuba acknowledged Rio as he returned to the kitchen.

At the same time, Ruri came out of the kitchen into the living room.

“Here you go, everyone. Thank you for your hard work today.” Ruri smiled in a friendly manner as she poured tea for Hayate and the others.

“R-Right. Much obliged, Lady Ruri.” Hayate’s stiff attitude from earlier flipped completely as he offered Ruri his thanks; he had a strange awkwardness to his

movements. He didn't even attempt to make eye contact with Ruri, apparently feeling shy. Rio watched, the change in Hayate taking him by surprise.

"Ruri, you can stay here and keep everyone company," Yuba ordered, putting Ruri in charge of giving the visitors a warm reception. Ruri had a bright and friendly personality, so she was perfect for the job. Yuba also had to remain with the visitors, which naturally left the cooking to Rio and Sayo.

Rio returned to the kitchen to resume cooking, and turned to Sayo. "Sorry for making you help so much, Sayo. Will Shin be okay for his meal today?" he asked with a guilty look.

"Yes. My brother will be eating dinner at Dola and Ume's place tonight. It happens quite often when important visitors come, so please don't let it bother you," Sayo said happily, shaking her head.

"Did something good happen?" Rio inquired about Sayo's good mood.

"Huh? Why do you ask?"

"It's just that you look happy."

Sayo tilted her head in confusion for a moment before she came to a realization.

"...Ah," she grinned shyly, before hesitantly asking Rio: "...Is it that obvious?"

"Yes." Rio nodded, making Sayo flush red.

"Umm, it's a secret."

"I see... Then I shall not pry any further." Rio's lips tugged upward in a bright smile. As long as Sayo was happy, he was glad.

"...Okay." A conflicted expression flickered over Sayo's face for a moment, but she nodded in assent.

"I'm sure everyone is hungry by now, so let's hurry with the preparations."

Sayo nodded at Rio's suggestion. "Okay. But... I kind of want to take time to enjoy cooking together, too," she mumbled under her breath.

Rio had already moved away, so the latter half of her sentence did not reach him.



Less than an hour later, all of the cooking had been completed, and the table was set for dinner.

“This is quite the extravagant meal. I wasn’t expecting to be treated to your precious stockpile of meat... And this isn’t preserved meat either. It must have been exhausting to prepare enough for this many people. You have my sincere thanks.” Hayate’s eyes widened at the sight of all the dishes lining the table.

As a tax officer traveling through many different villages, he had been treated to numerous meals in each village chief’s home, but they rarely ever served meat so generously like this. His attendants were all buzzing happily, too.

“Rio is a very accomplished hunter. He’s quite multi-talented, and has been a huge help in our village.” Ruri praised Rio with pride.

“Oh? So Lord Rio not only prepared the food, but hunted the meat himself as well? While my party can hunt, when it comes to cooking, the most we can do is grill the meat and prepare simple campfire foods. Being able to do all this as a young man is most impressive.” Hayate praised Rio in awe along with Ruri. The “campfire foods” he spoke of were the food supplies they used during their field operations.

“I traveled alone for some time, so I picked up the skill naturally. I was in charge of the main dish, but Sayo made all the other side dishes. Please eat up before they cool,” Rio said, looking at Sayo, prompting all the male attendants to liven up.

“Ooh, a woman’s cooking!”

Sayo ducked her head in embarrassment. Rio smiled wryly, and Hayate scolded his aides in shame. “Quiet down, all of you. Now, we shall dig in immediately. You have my deepest gratitude for your exceptional hospitality.” Hayate cleared his throat and sat up straight.

Yuba took that as a sign. “Then, let us eat,” she said, and everyone began their meal.

“If I may so inquire, Lord Rio, what kind of meat dish is this? I can tell it some sort of avian meat, but I am not familiar with the scent. The aroma is most

appetizing, I must say,” Hayate asked, having picked up a slice of the meat between his chopsticks and brought it to his nose to smell.

“This recipe is one that I acquired during my travels through foreign countries, which involved grilling the meat with herbs. The somewhat-unique aroma is characteristic to that recipe, but the main ingredient is the Lenou bird.”

“I see... The Lenou bird, hm? Ah, this is indeed... how shall I put this... delicious!”

Hayate swallowed his drool and placed the slice of meat in his mouth. The instant he bit down, the juicy flavor of the meat — with its perfectly complimentary seasoning — exploded in his mouth, making his eyes widen.

Seeing his reaction, the aides reached for the herb-grilled meat in a hurry, groaning in unison at the delicious taste on their tongues. They gobbled down their rice with it.

“How did you create such a wondrous taste?” Hayate asked with great interest.

“The main seasoning is salt and pepper, but I’ve also used some special herbs and oil that aren’t native to this area for flavor. The secret ingredient is a little bit of honey,” Rio explained.

“Ooh, you used pepper? Such a valuable ingredient... Was it really okay to use all these ingredients that are not native to our kingdom?” Hayate responded in surprise with a tinge of remorse.

“That’s all right. It’d be pointless to hold on to it forever, anyway. I decided to use it when I heard that an important guest was visiting the village.”

Salt was harvested in certain kingdoms with temperate climates across both the Yagumo and Strahl regions, so while it was pricey, it wasn’t impossible to obtain. While Rio had all the ingredients he could ever want preserved in the Time-Space Cache, he wasn’t foolish enough to openly reveal that, so he made up a lie that was suitable for the situation.

Well, that wasn’t the only reason. If he could use this opportunity to gain their guests’ favor, it might benefit the village if anything were to happen in the future. It appeared that everything was going exactly as Rio had planned, as

Hayate seemed to be revising his evaluation of Rio in a positive way.

“Umm, is pepper an expensive ingredient?” Ruri asked, still unsure of the value of the item.

“Well, it’s not as big of a deal in the areas where it is produced, but it isn’t cheap to purchase in our kingdom. The last time I saw it in the markets of the capital, it went for ten times the price of salt,” Hayate replied thoughtfully.

“Huh?!”

“Fweh?!”

Ruri and Sayo’s eyes widened in shock. While Yuba hadn’t made any noise, her eyes had widened by a fraction, too.

Rio had used pepper in his dishes for Yuba and Ruri several times before, but he had never disclosed the value of the seasoning. It wasn’t the kind of item the villagers would have any interest in during their lifetimes, so it was only natural that Ruri and the others were unaware of its worth.

“Rio, have you been using something that expensive on us the whole time?! You should have said so!” Ruri yelled in flabbergasted shock.

“...Erm, didn’t I say I had a lot less pepper than salt?”

“Y-You may have mentioned that, but you never said it was so expensive! Ugh...”

“Umm, I purchased it in one of the production areas, so it wasn’t that expensive.”

“E-Even so. If it was such a valuable item, you could have kept it for yourself...”

“I said there was no point in holding onto it forever, didn’t I? Don’t worry about it, really. Come on, let’s eat dinner before it gets cold.” Rio shook his head with a wry smile.

Thus, they settled down and resumed their meal. Eventually, the village’s specialty brew was served, turning the scene into a lively commotion. By the time Rio and Sayo prepared additional side dishes for the drinks, the male attendants were already flushed red with liquor.

“You all are going to feel it tomorrow if you drink too much now,” Hayate, their superior, said with a sigh.

“Haha — we know, Sir Hayate,” the aides replied with a strained laugh.

At the moment, the conversation was split between Yuba and the male attendants in one group, and Rio, Ruri, Sayo, and Hayate in another group.

“Are you not going to have even a single cup, Lord Hayate?” Rio asked.

“It is not that I do not want to, it is simply that I try to refrain from drinking when out on a job,” Hayate replied stoically.

“I see,” Rio replied with admiration.

“Ruri and Sayo aside, why are you not drinking, Lord Rio? There is no need to hold back just because we are here.” Hayate asked Rio the same question.

“I have my daily training to do after this, so I’m practicing self-restraint for today.”

“Oh, so you are studying some form of martial arts. I had surmised as much from the way you held yourself.”

“Yes. It’s just a hobby, though.”

“Hahaha. There is no need to be modest about it. You have traveled around the world at such a young age — I am sure you have considerable skill. Would you tell me a few tales from your travels? I rarely ever have the chance to leave the kingdom and travel elsewhere myself,” Hayate said with a soft laugh.

“It may not be very interesting to you,” Rio warned him in advance, nodding.

Hayate went ahead and began to question Rio about his journey. Ruri and Sayo listened intently for the most part, occasionally interrupting with their own questions for Rio. He answered their questions with as much as he was comfortable revealing; eventually, they asked about his parents’ hometown, which he named as the Karasuki Kingdom.

“So, your parents were born in this country. Then, it’s possible that you were named after the person who appeared in the legends of our kingdom.” Hayate nodded in understanding.

“Aah, you mean the legend of Ryuo the Hero? That sure brings back memories. My father used to tell me about it,” Ruri said nostalgically, the story in question immediately coming to mind.

“Is it a famous story?” Rio cocked his head and asked Sayo, who sat beside him.

“Yes. All of the villagers hear about it when they’re children.” Sayo nodded.

“What kind of legend is it?”

“Let me see. If I recall correctly...” Hayate began to relay the story.

Once upon a time, over a thousand years ago (before the kingdom of Karasuki had been formed), evil beings ran rampant all over the land, threatening the livelihood of the people. They devastated the land, leaving a huge trail of death and despair in their wake. That was when the hero, who the people would later call Ryuo, appeared.

Ryuo was a strong, kind, and exceptional person. He was able to single-handedly take on and defeat the evil beings that the people of the time were helpless against. He shared his food with anyone on the brink of starving to death, and would heal anyone’s severe injuries in the blink of an eye.

It was said that he also taught spirit arts to the people of the Yagumo region, back when there were barely any users at all.

People from all over flocked to these lands to rely on Ryuo. They placed him on a pedestal as their hero, and it was only a matter of time before a new kingdom was established around them.

However, Ryuo was only one man, and there was a limit to what he could do alone.

No matter how many evil beings he defeated, they continued to spawn out of nowhere. At the same time, surges of poverty-stricken citizens that had heard the rumors came calling, seeking his salvation. Despite this, Ryuo continued fighting without rest, and continued to act as a savior without respite. He continued saving without rest. Because he was so strong and so kind, he alone remained the perfect hero for the people.

No matter how much he suffered, Ryuo maintained the image of a completely flawless hero... until a time where there were mass casualties.

One day, Ryuo declared that he had located the place where the evil beings were spawning from. His plan was to head there immediately in order to eliminate them, but no one else was capable of standing and fighting alongside him. So, accompanied by only one travel companion, Ryuo departed for the place where the evil beings originated from, leaving the people behind to wait for his return.

That was when tragedy occurred.

While Ryuo was away, hordes of evil beings ambushed the humans in full force. Those that faced the evil beings did so with their armies, but without Ryuo fighting alongside them, their death toll only continued to climb higher and higher. By the time Ryuo had returned, the lands were thoroughly ravaged by the war that had broken out in his absence.

Ryuo used his mighty strength to annihilate the advancing evil beings in an instant, but once the war was over, someone spoke up.

Why?

Why didn't you come to save us sooner?

Why did you leave us here to die?

Although Ryuo apologized for his late arrival, someone else insisted:

The dead won't return.

The dead won't rest in peace just because you apologized.

Of course, it's not like we haven't had any casualties until now...

However, there had never been a single battle that brought about as many deaths as this one, and the people's expectations had been betrayed. The discontent that had built up during the war amongst the people grew as a collective mass, and exploded all at once.

While there were some within that mass that tried to calm the others, there was no way for the voice of the few to reach through to the rioting mob.

Ryuo did not fulfill his duty as a hero — the people saw him guilty of that sin — but he bowed his head before them and accepted their criticisms at face value.

As a result, Ryuo declared himself unfit for the title of king, and renounced himself from the throne.

The new dynasty began shortly after — the antecedent to the current Kingdom of Karasuki.

Life continued peacefully henceforth, with no further attacks from the evil beings. Once an extended period of time had passed with no conflicts, the people finally realized that Ryuo had destroyed the origins of the evil beings, precisely as he said he would.

Thus, the people started pondering out loud in recollection. *Where might Ryuo be at this moment?* they wondered, but by that point, Ryuo had already disappeared from the land.

“The threat of evil beings attacking this land has diminished, but they still exist. I must eliminate the dangers that remain,” he had told a select few people before leaving the kingdom.

The king publicly announced the truth to the people: an admission that they had committed an unforgivable crime in driving Ryuo away, which prompted the people to reflect.

After time had passed, they would speak of the legends of Ryuo, passing his stories down from one generation to the next. They acknowledged their faults, and prayed that one day, their hero would return.

Once Hayate had finished his story, he let out a small sigh.

“I do not know if this folk tale truly happened or not. I do not even know if this Ryuo truly existed. However, I believe the story is one that should be passed on. There is much that can be learned from it,” he said.

“I always felt sorry for the king in that story and cried over him when I was little. It still makes me feel a little gloomy, even now,” Ruri murmured with a helpless smile.

“I think I cried the first time I heard it, too...” added Sayo. “But the Great Ryuo from the story sounds lovely.”

“His name really is similar to Rio’s, after all,” Ruri teased.

“T-That’s not the reason why!” Sayo said, blushing.

“Ahaha,” Ruri laughed. “But, if Rio’s parents really did name him after this story, I wonder what kind of meaning they wanted to put behind it. Did they want him to become someone like Ryuo?” Ruri said, pondering to herself.

“...Who knows?” Rio said with a soft, somewhat fond smile.

The four of them continued to chat for a while longer.

“Here you are, Sir Hayate. Please have some tea.” Ruri poured some tea and offered it to Hayate beside her.

“Ah, right. Thank you,” When Ruri’s body approached his, Hayate offered his gratitude. He took a sip of his tea before expressing his strong impression of the taste. “It is delicious.”

“You don’t need to exaggerate. It’s just the cheap stuff the villagers drink.”

“No, that is not true at all. Lady Ruri poured this tea. Your average tea cannot compare.”

“Ahaha. You flatter me.” Ruri perceived Hayate’s words as a compliment, and laughed in amusement.

What a fascinating person, Rio thought as he watched their antics with a smile.

While Hayate could be a bit blunt and awkward, he was an honest and genuine person. He was the 18-year-old heir to one of the kingdom’s advanced martial arts families. Despite wearing the mantle of his family lineage, he never used his position to domineer over others. He normally carried himself with dignity, but when it came to Ruri, his reactions seemed somewhat innocent and naive. Rio’s impression of Hayate was quite favorable.

On the other hand, Ruri was already a girl of marriageable age and favored highly by many of the male villagers. Even as her cousin, Rio found her to be charming. He hoped she would marry someone who didn’t have any baggage,

but Ruri herself never brought it up, and therefore did not seem interested.

Along came Hayate — a young man with a highly promising future, who already seemed to have fallen for Ruri. Of course, while the final decision of marriage was ultimately up to the two of them, Hayate certainly had no shortcomings as a candidate to become Ruri's husband.

With that thought, Rio nonchalantly struck up a conversation with Sayo beside him, hoping to give Ruri and Hayate the space to speak to each other alone. Sayo seemed to be thinking along the same lines as Rio, springing enthusiastically at the chance to talk to Rio.

Thus, time passed in the blink of an eye.

"If we chat any longer than this, we will all be exhausted come morning. Let us end the party now," Hayate suggested. He had been thoroughly enjoying his conversation with Ruri, but at the same time, he knew when to back off.

"Yes, let's. Sayo, you should stay over tonight. It's already late, so you can sleep with me." Ruri said, deciding that Sayo would sleep over; there was no need to inform Shin, as he already knew that there was a chance of this happening.

They quickly cleaned everything up and retired to their beds, with the exception of Rio, who went to complete his training practice.



Rio swung his sword under the cover of night in the garden of the village chief's house. His breaths came out harshly, his body emitting heat as a white steam rose from his skin. After attentively swinging his sword for several minutes, he took a deep breath and returned his sword to its sheath.

"Phew..."

It was already late into the night, so he decided to wrap up and immediately headed toward the bathhouse nearby. However...

"Hm?" Rio froze on the spot, feeling a presence hidden in the darkness.

He turned his eyes toward the direction of the presence; at the same time, he manipulated the wind with his spirit arts, blowing a light breeze in the same

direction.

Wind-related spirit arts were also good for detecting essence, as a high level wind spirit arts user was capable of releasing wind embedded with a faint amount of their own essence. This tactic allowing the wind to detect the essence of anything it touched.

Rio couldn't visually confirm someone's figure due to the darkness, but he could detect the slight amount of essence coming from what was most likely a person walking down the road in front of the village chief's house.

Is someone walking around at this time?

It was late enough for most villagers to be asleep already, but not late enough to say there couldn't possibly be anyone out and about at this time.

There was only one essence reaction, and its owner was getting further and further from the village chief's home.

...Well, whatever.

If it wasn't getting any closer, then there was no need to pay it any more attention. Rio picked up the towel he left next to him and wiped his sweat away.

With Gon's group of outsiders staying in the village, Rio had secretly set up sorcery barriers yesterday that could detect intruders around the village chief's house. If anyone entered the grounds, he would know immediately. Specifically, if a living being with a certain amount of essence crossed the barrier, the spirit stone being used as the source of essence for the barrier would react by giving off a huge amount of light and heat. The efficacy of the barrier could be toggled at will, and the barrier would fail to activate if the spirit stone was carried outside of the barrier.

Since many people were always going in and out during the day, Rio kept the barrier off during the daylight hours and activated its effect at night.

At the moment, the spirit stone core of the barrier was silent.

After Rio washed the sweat from his body and cleaned himself in the bath, he retired to his room and fell asleep.



Not long after Rio fell asleep, in a small cabin on the outskirts of the village...

“Let’s get going,” Gon said in an impatient tone.

About an hour ago, he had sent one of his underlings to scope out the village chief’s house in advance. The underling had reported hearing someone in the garden, so they had waited on standby until now.

Thanks to that, restlessness was pent up within him. Unable to withstand those hasty feelings any longer, Gon jumped to his feet and left the cabin with several other men.

Although their vision was impaired by the darkness, they quietly and carefully made their way to the village chief’s house. Not a single villager was awake at this time of night, making silence dominate the air surrounding the village.

When they arrived before the village chief’s house, with practiced movements, Gon made his way around the side of the house and removed the wooden sliding window attached to the side of a particular room. He had visited Yuba’s house numerous times before while accompanying his parents, so he knew where Ruri’s room was located. He also knew that the sliding door was the easiest point of entry.

The wooden sliding door was supported by a stick on the inside, but that stick had no effect if the entire door was removed, though there was nothing he could do about the moderately-loud clunking sound that it made.

Gon handed the removed sliding door to one of his followers and swiftly snuck into the room. Barely a minute had passed since they entered the property.

Hm? There’s two of them?

He froze at the sight of two girls sleeping on two mats spread out before him.

Tch, why are there two of them? Ruri and... Who’s this? I’ve seen this face somewh— Ooh, it’s Shin’s sister!

The unexpected turn of events made Gon click his tongue. He approached the two figures to get a better look at their faces in the dark. He immediately

identified one of them as his target, Ruri, and belatedly realized that the other one was Sayo. A wide grin spread across Gon's face.

"Mm... Is someone there?" Ruri stirred from where she lay next to Sayo. She had probably been awakened by the sounds from before, and the presence of someone in the room.

"Tch," Gon clicked his tongue again. He leaned over her body and smothered her mouth.

"Mmgh?!"

Naturally, that anomaly made Ruri's eyes snap open.

"Quiet. If you make a fuss, I'll make you regret it," Gon threatened right in Ruri's face. With those words, she realized who the intruder was.

Gon.

"Mmm! Mm, mmrgh!" Unwilling to yield to Gon's demand, Ruri started to kick and struggle.

"Hey, I told you not to move—" Gon tried to threaten her further, but this time, Sayo woke up.

"...Ruri? Huh? U-Umm, wha—"

Shit— With that spur-of-the-moment thought, Gon brought his fist down next to Ruri's pinned face with great force. *Thump*. It made a blunt noise that echoed, making Ruri and Sayo flinch with their entire bodies.

"Listen up!"

Gon spoke to them in a quiet but intimidating whisper. He grabbed Ruri by the collar and swung his fist at her face, stopping moments before it made contact.

"If you keep fussing, the next one goes to your face. Got it?" he continued.

Overwhelmed by his intensity, Ruri stopped resisting.

"Hmph," Gon huffed in satisfaction. "And that goes for you, too," he said, grabbing Sayo closer by the collar.

"A-Ah... Uh..."

“Do you hear me? Nod your heads.” The violent approach had Sayo in tears as Gon continued to pressure them menacingly. Sayo almost reflexively nodded her head, but...

“W-Wha— You— Gah?!”

The yells of one of Gon’s followers could be heard from outside the sliding door. At the same time, the sound of something heavy being thrown rang out.

“What is happening, Lord Rio?! Wha— You there, what do you think you are doing?!”

Hayate’s voice could be heard further away, which meant that the one who defeated Gon’s follower just now was probably Rio. He had detected an abnormality in the spirit stone core of the sorcery barrier and came running.

“Shit, we gotta run!” the voices of the men outside were saying. Everything had become noisy all at once.

“Hold it! You will not escape!”

Hayate chased after the man who fled into the night.

“Fuck, they found us! How— Gwah?!” Gon was visibly aggravated at the turn of events, when a dazzling light shone into the room from outside, making everything before him turn to a pure white.

Rio had blinded Gon’s vision, having stuck his left hand out and shone a light into the room with spirit arts. Once he saw the sight of Gon clutching Sayo by the collar and Ruri’s disorderly clothes, he spoke to Gon in an icy cold voice.

“...What are you doing?” he asked.

“Kuh, fuck you!” Gon hurriedly released his grip on Sayo’s collar and broke into a run toward the door outside. He intended on forcibly knocking Rio away from where he stood before the doorway, but...

“Gah! Hah?!”

Rio easily sent him flying, his back hitting the ground with a loud slam. He didn’t even have time to brace himself for the landing, placing a huge amount of pressure on his chest and knocking the breath out of his lungs.

“...Why are you running? I asked what you were doing. Answer me.”

Rio’s face was completely void of expression as he looked down at Gon, who was gasping for breath. “Hah... Hah... Hh...”

“What’s wrong? Answer me. What were you trying to do?”

“Hahn... Hh...” Gon wheezed through his mouth, desperately seeking oxygen.

“Oi, hurry up and answer me. You want to breathe, don’t you?” Rio roughly grabbed Gon by the collar. Tightening his grip around his neck, Rio intentionally made it even harder for Gon to breathe.

“Hah... Ahh... Night... crawling... R-Rape...”

In a desperate attempt to be saved, Gon unthinkingly gasped out the words “night crawling” and “rape.” His voice was so strained, it was difficult to make out the sounds clearly, but that hardly mattered. Rio knew the answer before he even asked.

“Oh, really.” He nodded noncommittally, then swung at Gon’s face with all his strength.

“Gah! Agh!” Gon groaned in pain.

“...I’m not done yet.” Rio’s fist drove into Gon’s face once more.

He didn’t hesitate for a moment; there was even some killing intent behind his punch. It was hard to believe these were the actions of someone who once felt a sense of reluctance about killing someone who had tried to kill him first. The moment Rio laid his eyes on the scene of Gon assaulting both Ruri and Sayo, his head was filled with a flashback of the last time he saw his mother.

He would never forget it.

The sight of Ayame being toyed with by men in order to protect her powerless 5-year-old son...

Before he knew it, Rio was taking out his emotions on Gon, his body moving of its own accord.

There was no holding back the endless hatred flowing out of him. Something had snapped inside of him — he had completely lost his mind.

“...Ah, ah, ah...”

Gon pleaded for his life through wheezing gasps, but Rio didn't let up on his punches for even a second.

He wouldn't let him fall unconscious.

He wouldn't give him an easy death.

He would never forgive him, no matter what.

Only after hurting him to the limits of pain that his body could endure would he kill him.



That was the only thing in Rio's mind as he moved his fist with just the right amount of control. He couldn't see anything else around himself, but his rage that bordered on insanity engulfed those watching on.

Ruri's body simply trembled, whereas Sayo cried for Rio to stop. Hayate stood stock still in a daze.

"What's going on?!" Awakened by the commotion, Yuba and Hayate's aides came running out of the front door with torches in hand. Thanks to that, Hayate finally snapped out of his stupor.

"N-No! Enough, Lord Rio! He will die if you hit him any more!" he said, trying to stop Rio in a panic.

He'll die?

Of course he would, Rio was trying to *kill* him, after all. Spurred on by Hayate's words, Rio straddled Gon's body and moved to punch him even more, but Hayate grabbed Rio's fist before it made contact. He glanced at Ruri and Sayo huddling together.

"Wait, Lord Rio! I understand how you feel, but you are frightening the girls. This man will face retribution in due time, but we must hear his testimony too. So, please. Won't you stay your hand?" he pleaded strongly.

Rio finally came to his senses and looked at the two inside the room. His eyes made contact with Ruri, who immediately turned her face away, while Sayo was looking at Rio with terrible sadness in her eyes. That was when Rio finally let his fist fall limp.

Still, an indescribable rage continued to swirl around inside his chest. He couldn't bear to look at Gon's face any longer, otherwise he really would kill him.

"Gah... Hah... Hah..."

Rio let go of Gon's collar and slammed the back of his head against the ground — hard. Gon's face was so swollen already that he couldn't feel any more pain from the impact. His breath came out in ragged gasps, and it was difficult to tell whether he was still conscious or not.

Rio let out a heavy sigh filled with all his irritation toward Gon; he didn't feel even a shred of guilt looking at his state. He calmly wondered if he was such a cold-hearted person, as if he were a third-party spectator looking in on the situation.

"Is that... Gon?" Yuba approached fearfully, hovering the torch in her hand over to clearly reveal Gon's face.

"Yes. He was caught red-handed trying to assault Lady Ruri and Lady Sayo. Please take care of them."

Hayate gave Yuba a brief explanation before directing her toward the girls.

"...I understand." Yuba nodded with a solemn expression and went over to the girls inside the room.

"All of you, split up. One group will go and apprehend the accomplices that have been knocked out outside, while the other group will head to the cabin where their fellow travelers are staying and investigate the situation there," Hayate directed his attendants, who nodded and swiftly followed their orders.

Next, Hayate began to cast a healing spirit art on Gon's wounded face. He summoned a faint healing light in his hand and brought it close to Gon's face. The rate of recovery was clearly slow, though; Hayate perhaps did not specialize in healing spirit arts, or he could have been weakening the healing effect on purpose. Rio was capable of performing a much stronger level of healing spirit art, but he chose to stand there and watch in silence.

Eventually, Gon recovered up to a certain point, and groaned. "Uh, uugh..."

"Hey, are you awake?" Hayate said to Gon.

"I-It... lth hur... hurths... Help... me..." Gon was moving his mouth desperately.

"...Lord Hayate. Allow me to handle the healing. I specialize in healing spirit arts, so I can heal him until he can speak properly."

No one knew what Rio was thinking as he made such an offer to Hayate. Without waiting for Hayate's agreement, he came right up to them and placed a hand against Gon's face to cast the spirit art.

"Oh... This is..." Hayate muttered, seeing the swelling on Gon's face fade

away.

For a moment, he feared Rio would kill Gon on the spot, but seeing the healing being carried out exactly as stated made him give Rio the benefit of the doubt. Roughly ten seconds passed until Gon's face had recovered enough for him to open his eyes. Rio stopped his healing spirit arts and gave Gon a direct order.

"Hey, wake up. You can speak now, right?"

"E-Eek! *You!*" Gon peeled open his swollen eyes, only to spot Rio's face and react in shock. He tried to gather his strength and yell, but the pain made his face pull into a tight grimace.

"Watch how you speak. Who do you think healed you? Do you want me to undo what I just did?" Rio said coldly, making Gon gulp in pure fear. His hostility toward Rio had completely quieted and his gaze wandered in search of help.

"Lord Rio..." Unable to meet Gon's eyes, Hayate called Rio's name.

"Lord Hayate. How will this be dealt with?" Rio inquired with a cold voice.

"...Though it was unsuccessful, attempted rape is still a felony. He was caught in the act with myself, a government official, as witness. No one would complain if he was cut down right here and now. Or, you could seek punishment from the kingdom, in which case he would either be sentenced to the death penalty, or forced into penal slavery. He does have ties to this village, though, so the final decision is up to the affected parties or Lady Yuba," Hayate replied, looking at Ruri and Sayo.

"Is that so..." Rio responded with a frown, but immediately took on the emotionless mask on his face as he looked down at Gon with an icy glare.

"That's how it is. You'll behave until everything is settled, won't you?"

"Eek..." Gon trembled with a start.

"Answer me."

"I-I got it! Ah, n-no, I understand! I'll behave!" Rio's faint irritation made Gon answer in fear.

It seems like the hypnosis is working. Rio turned an examining gaze toward

Gon.

He had cast a spirit art of hypnosis on Gon as he was healing him before. While the effects of hypnosis arts weren't permanent, they were often used for immoral purposes, so the spirit folk village had treated them as forbidden arts, depending on the intention of the use and the matter of the suggestion.

This time, the hypnosis Rio had cast leaned toward those forbidden arts. He had planted the suggestion that Gon should fear him.

Rio had never cast any hypnosis arts until now, but he didn't hesitate to use it on Gon. Even if it went against his own morals, he wanted to thoroughly crush Gon's mind.

Gon had taken a severe beating at Rio's hands already, so the effects of the hypnosis took hold easily. It was even possible for the effects to linger after the hypnosis wore off.

Rio's face twisted with a sour expression as he tore his gaze away from Gon. Then, he looked around at everyone standing and offered a word of apology.

"...Please accept my deepest apologies for losing my composure so dreadfully. It must have been quite unsightly, especially for Ruri and Sayo..."

"N-No, not at all. It's all right."

"T-Thank you very much, Sir Rio!"

Ruri shook her head hesitantly while Sayo thanked Rio in a shrill voice.

"...No, I have done nothing to be thanked for. I did something that hurt you two even more than you were already."

"It's okay, Rio. We're fine, really..." Ruri answered worriedly because of the regretful expression on Rio's face. She really wanted to ask how he was doing himself, but for some reason, she felt as though she shouldn't.

"Sorry, I'm feeling a little tired. May I leave the rest to you?" Rio averted his gaze from Ruri and Sayo guiltily, turning toward Yuba and Hayate instead. He felt as though he shouldn't remain at the scene any longer.

"Sure, we can talk properly later. Leave this to us for now. Thank you." Yuba nodded with a gentle smile. Hayate also met Rio's eyes and nodded with force.

“...Thank you very much. Then, if you’d please excuse me.” With those words, Rio turned on his heel. He went around to the front and entered the house.

“Ah...” Sayo was about to follow after Rio when Ruri’s hand stopped her. Her shoulders slumped as she wondered in a daze if it was really okay to leave things like this, but Ruri simply shook her head. There was no way to know the answer to that.

Rio returned to his room and lay on his sleeping mat, looking up at the ceiling. His face twisted on the verge of tears as he reflected on himself and how shameful his actions really were.

After behaving so violently — as though *he* had been the victim — and making the scene more chaotic, then scaring Ruri and Sayo, he was the first to run away.

He probably had a terrible image now, having made them accommodate his needs. In the end, he had most likely caused a huge amount of trouble.

“How pathetic,” Rio muttered to himself, then gritted his teeth and came to a decision.

Tomorrow would be the start of a new day. He might never return to his old self, but he would endeavor toward doing just that — on the outside, at least. That way, they would be able to return to those peaceful days once more.

For the whole night, Rio remained curled up on his futon, body trembling from his self-loathing.

Chapter 4: Parting

The next morning, the village women witnessed an odd sight at the daily food trade.

Gon and his followers were tied up in the pillory as criminals in the village square. Hayate's subordinates stood next to them as guards, watching over them as they explained the reason why Gon's group was being restrained.

In a little under an hour, the events that had happened the previous night had spread throughout the village.

The story being told went something like this: Gon's group had tried to go night crawling and attacked Ruri and Sayo. However, Rio immediately noticed their intrusion and paid them back with a fight. As a result, Rio had thoroughly beaten up the ringleader, Gon. Rio left him out in the bone-chilling cold autumn air all night in only his underwear as a punishment.

The villagers had been filled with rage when they heard about the night crawling, but once they saw Gon's horribly swollen face and shivering body, their anger was quelled by his well-deserved treatment.

And so, last night's incident became the talk of the village from early morning onward. When Rio went out that morning to trade for ingredients, the villagers praised his achievement with welcoming smiles.

Rio had already reflected on his actions last night and felt rather uncomfortable with their praise, but he did his best to not let that show on the outside, and went about his day as usual. The same went for when he was around Yuba, Ruri, Sayo, and Hayate.

Hayate's closest aides and subordinates had all gone out on business supervising and interrogating Gon's gang, leaving only Yuba, Ruri, Rio, Sayo, and Hayate left in the village chief's house.

Yuba and Hayate were awake already, but Ruri and Sayo hadn't fallen asleep until very late, so Rio offered to be the one to prepare breakfast, which was

why he was out trading ingredients in the morning. Once breakfast was ready and the girls had woken up, everyone gathered in the living room.

“Everyone... I’m sorry for the trouble I caused yesterday. Please accept my deepest apologies,” Rio said to everyone once more.

Last night, Rio had displayed what was truly violent behavior in front of Ruri and Sayo, who were just simple village girls — it wouldn’t have been odd if his carelessness had hurt them enough to cause some kind of trauma. Subjecting others to the sight of his fury also served as a form of violence, after all. That was why Rio wanted to apologize properly and take responsibility for his mistake; he would accept all blame without making excuses.

“There’s nothing for you to apologize for. Thank you for protecting Ruri and Sayo.” Yuba shook her head on behalf of everyone, smiling gently at Rio to ease his worries.

Rio was slightly taken aback for a moment, before he frowned. “But, Ruri and Sayo were frightened because of me...”

“You don’t need to worry about Ruri and Sayo. Isn’t that right, you two?” Yuba said, looking at the girls.

“Yup. To be honest, I was a little scared... But then Sayo said Rio was so angry because he wanted to save us so much. We shouldn’t be scared by that. Otherwise, it’d hurt Rio,” Ruri said with an apologetic look and nodded.

“It’s not Sir Rio’s fault! So please, don’t apologize.” Sayo appealed to Rio in earnest, nodding her head furiously.

“Lord Rio, it is exactly as they say. I may be overstepping my boundaries as an outsider, but you do not need to let this bother you. If you had not hit him, I would have done so instead,” Hayate agreed with a shrug.

“...Thank you very much, everyone. But, it is true that my rage blinded me from properly considering my actions... There were better methods I could have used to save you. So please, allow me to apologize.”

Unable to bear his emotions, Rio’s face nearly twisted into a grimace. He grit his teeth and bowed his head instead. Everyone’s warm words seeped into his body, but it wasn’t that easy for him to change his attitude just because the

people involved offered their words of forgiveness so easily.

“What an honest boy. Just like a certain someone else,” Yuba said with a huff of laughter.

“A certain someone?” Ruri asked Yuba with a curious look.

“Hmm... More importantly, Rio woke up early to make us this breakfast. We should eat up before it cools. There are still many issues left to deal with, too — I have to summon their village chief here to discuss what to do with those boys, so let’s wrap things up quickly,” Yuba said cheerfully, changing the topic.

Hayate’s attendants were currently assisting them by traveling out to Gon’s village, tasked with bringing the village chief and relatives of the criminals back with them. They would arrive in a day or two to discuss the incident that had occurred.

Everyone gave a strained smile and dug into their food in agreement.

“Sayo! Is Sayo all right?! What about Ruri?!” The front door slammed open, revealing Shin and the other youths.

“B-Brother?!” Their sudden appearance made Sayo widen her eyes in shock.

“Oh my, everyone at once?” Ruri laughed bitterly.

“O-Ooh! Sayo, Ruri! Are you two all right?!” Shin asked in a flurry once he spotted Sayo and Ruri.

“We’re fine, and you’re being noisy. Aren’t you a bit late to come running now?” Yuba said in a tired voice.

“W-We were drinking at the boss’ house until late last night, so we k-kind... slept in. Then Ume came barging in and told us everything. I-I’m... I’m sorry,” Shin and the others panted as they apologized, their expressions guilty.

“I figured that was the case. Well, rest assured: the incident was a failed attempt. Rio beat Gon to a pulp, and his co-conspirators were apprehended by Lord Hayate. Did you not see them hanging their heads in the square?” Yuba said with an exasperated smile.

“N-No, we ran here as fast as we could...”

“Well, that’s how it is. I can fill you in on the details later, so why don’t you go and give Gon a piece of your mind before you head home? The girls are fine, as you can see.”

“O-Okay...” The boys nodded, retreating dejectedly. Shin, however, remained.

“Mr. Hayate, and... Rio, too. Th... Thank you for saving these two!” he said with gratitude, shooting Rio a somewhat embarrassed glance as he did so. The youths exchanged looks with each other before they all turned back to murmur words of gratitude.

“I did not do anything special — all of the glory should go to Lord Rio.” Hayate shook his head with a quiet laugh. Rio gave a somewhat uncomfortable smile as Ruri and Sayo giggled.

“See you later, then,” Shin said shyly, turning on his heel; the other young men followed him out. Yuba snorted in amusement as she watched their retreating backs.

Later on, when the boys saw the miserable state that Gon and the others in the square were in, they vowed to themselves to never pick a fight with Rio again.



Two days later, the village chief of Gon’s group arrived, led by Hayate’s aides. The party was summoned to the village hall to meet with Yuba; Rio was also sitting in on the meeting alongside Hayate, who was acting as a witness.

“How does your village intend on compensating for this incident?” Yuba asked the village chief — Gon’s father — who sat directly opposite of her.

“We have also been at our wit’s end with these youths in our village. While this particular incident was most inexcusable, I would like to consider it an unlucky accident,” Gon’s father answered vaguely, shaking his head from side to side in an exaggerated way.

“Does that mean you shall bear responsibility for the chaos that Gon has caused? Those boys are primarily your responsibility, correct?”

“That is a separate matter. Our village will not object to whatever form of

punishment you choose, but their actions are their own responsibility. They are adults, after all.” Yuba’s pursuit to deem him the responsible party made Gon’s father resort to making excuses.

There were no objections from those behind him, either. They seemed to have accepted giving up on the criminals during their journey here.

“I know your village is struggling to maintain your livelihood as is. I can understand why you would not want to take on anymore unnecessary burdens... However, we have no intentions of backing down without a fight. For now, allow me to inform you of what we aim to do,” Yuba said, before presenting her suggestions on how to deal with the incident.

“First — and this is the only point in which we will not concede — Gon will be handed over to the kingdom for punishment. From what Lord Hayate has told us, he will most likely end up in penal slavery.”

“Indeed, that is justified.” Gon’s father nodded in annoyance. Though his response seemed cruel, Gon’s existence had become that much of a burden to him.

“Next, with regard to the other men who were complicit in assisting Gon... Even if we handed them over to the kingdom, they probably wouldn’t be sentenced to penal slavery. They would either be whipped a few times, or given a short jail sentence, before being released. To be honest, that is not enough to quell our resentment; we wish to receive due compensation. Which brings me to this: we will take a few of the worst in the group and sell them in the capital as contracted slaves, then receive the money from that as compensation,” Yuba explained in a collected manner.

“...While it is true that contracted slaves can fetch a fair amount, I doubt the men will agree. What are the terms of your intended slave contract?” Gon’s father asked doubtfully.

There was one crucial condition to forming a slave contract with someone: the agreement of the one being contracted as the slave. In order to forcibly form a slave contract without the consent of the person in question, either bankruptcy or a debt bond, along with witnesses, were required.

In regards to this situation, Gon’s gang wasn’t burdened with any debt, nor

did they have bonds with which to pay any compensation money. No matter how much guilt they had in complying with the crime, it was hard to imagine they would follow through with the procedure of becoming slaves.

“That is where we would like to ask for your cooperation. If you work together with us, then we can promise not to pursue your village for any further responsibility. How does that sound?” Yuba grinned, her eyes fixed on Gon’s father.

“...What am I cooperating with?” Gon’s father cautiously asked in return.

“We want you to tell the boys that you were able to negotiate for everyone, other than Gon, to be pardoned from being handed over to the kingdom... under the condition of paying a compensation fee.”

“...They do not have the savings to pay for such a fee. Even if they return to our village, they will simply be ostracized,” Gon’s father interjected sarcastically.

“Yes, but do listen until the end. I know that they do not have any savings. That is why you are going to tell them that you shouldered the fee for them, then use that as reason to issue a debt bond. Once there is a bond, we can use that as the reason to attach a slavery contract on the group of them. The rest you understand, right?”

“Wha—?!” Gon’s father widened his eyes in shock, expression stiffening. “Isn’t that rather underhanded? It’s true that they may agree to slavery that way, but it seems as though we are deceiving them... To go that far is...” he said with a hint of guilty conscience.

The parents of the co-conspirators behind him stirred noisily.

“Hm. I know that night crawling is customary in a village society, but it is only allowed with the consent of both parties. Attempting rape on the other party is a crime on par with robbery and murder, and the accomplices that assisted Gon have to pay their dues. Your children’s stupidity has given my precious granddaughter emotional trauma she’ll have to carry for her entire life. I have no intention of giving in easily.”

“H-Hmm...” Yuba’s furious declaration left Gon’s father at a loss for words.

“If you refuse to cooperate, then I don’t have any other options. We’ll simply

return to the beginning of our discussion, and have your village take primary responsibility instead. Oh, and for the time being, we've confiscated the trade items that were loaded onto your cargo carriage," Yuba informed Gon's father nonchalantly upon seeing his half-hearted response.

"...H-Hah? W-What did you just say?"

"I said, we are holding the trade items that were loaded onto your cargo carriage as collateral for our compensation fee."

"Y-You must be kidding me! Those items belong to our village... This is tyranny — a robbery! ...Lord Hayate, surely such behavior cannot be tolerated?!" Gon's father yelled in a panic and pleaded with Hayate, who had been standing to the side and listening.

"...I am sorry, but your village was the one that allowed such wild people to act as your representatives in the trade squad. A great part of the responsibility falls onto you. You may have intended on tactfully banishing them if they caused any issues, but the kingdom is not about to act just because Lady Yuba has confiscated your village's trade goods," Hayate said, shaking his head coldly.

"T-That can't be..." Gon's father slumped over in despair. The profits gained by selling their trade items were vital in supporting the villagers' livelihood; without them, the village would suffer greatly.

"That is why I am giving you a choice. You were the ones who raised your children in such a way, no? Either you make those boys take responsibility for their own actions, or you can wipe their asses for them. It is up to you." Yuba pressed them for a decision mercilessly.

"...All right. We'll have them take responsibility." Gon's father hung his head and agreed after a moment's hesitation.



After the discussions regarding Gon's gang had wrapped up, Rio visited the northern hill where his parents' graves were, all by himself. The sun was beginning to dip down, and the fall scenery before him was stained a madder red. Rio stood before his parents' graves and gently touched his right hand to the stone pillar.

He reflected on the moment he nearly beat Gon to death. For the three days since the incident, Rio had constantly been looking into his own heart.

At that moment in time, I truly had the intent to kill in me. That intent turned to violence... I was going to kill Gon; I didn't care about killing another human...

Rio removed his hand from the pillar and stared at both of his palms. It was an emotion that Rio was familiar with... No, he wasn't simply familiar with it; he had once felt that emotion toward one person in particular.

Malice powerful enough to make him feel nauseous.

Overflowing hatred strong enough to make him go mad.

A pure, pitch-black killing intent... All toward the man who took his mother from him.

Yes, Rio once tried to exact revenge against that man. It was all he thought about, all he wished for as he lived in the hellish environment of the slums.

But... When did that all change?

When did he begin to think of murder as the most primitive wrongdoing humans could commit?

When did he realize that vengeance was not a forgivable motive for murder?

When was he able to shut out the sinister emotions that slept within?

The answer was obvious. It was since the very moment Rio began to harbor the memories of Amakawa Haruto inside of him.

The human named Amakawa Haruto had averted his eyes.

Rio himself hated the man who had murdered his mother, but Amakawa Haruto within him had his hesitations about revenge.

Nothing would come from vengeance, and his mother wouldn't want him to resort to it. Even if he got his revenge, nothing would be left for him.

Besides, since he had come to hate that way of life, he understood that acts such as taking revenge, killing people, and defiling his hands would make him the same as *that* man, no matter how much he justified it to himself.

He didn't want to know or realize that feeling.

He was an egoist — a dirty human just like that man. An arrogant, ugly human, living only as he desired. It was easier to live that way, to lick his wounds and cover up the truth with empty words.

That was why Rio had hesitated to kill anyone, because he believed it was wrong to do so. By restraining himself, he had thought he could become an honest person who didn't cause any inconveniences for others.

It would have been a wonderful thing, but they were all hollow words. Nothing more than ideals... Ones that didn't comply with the cruel reality of this world.

Humans were not the same. There were all kinds of people in the world — some were rational, some were self-centered, and each had their own set of morals. That was why humans clashed with each other; when they did, their true character was revealed.

For instance, it would be ideal if a compromise could be reached during those clashes, but that wasn't always the case. Some humans took advantage of others under the name of compromise in order to pursue their own gains. Some would even purposefully clash with others out of ill will.

Rio had also met and clashed with all kinds of people throughout his life; even so, there hadn't been anyone Rio could bare his true character toward, until Gon had forcibly exposed Rio's true character.

He could not turn into a human like the man who killed his mother.

With that thought, Rio had fought to become a rational and honest person... Until he followed his instincts and tried to kill Gon, to dirty his hands. The incident was enough to make him aware of his hypocrisy and naivety.

That was why Rio understood that he wanted to continue being a rational person with strong self-control, an honest person who didn't inconvenience others. And yet, regardless of his intent and regardless of morals, there were some people he couldn't forgive by any means.

This was the second time I wanted to kill someone. No... I actually tried to kill him. With these hands, and all of my own will, I tried to kill Gon. Because of that...

Now that he understood, he couldn't remain his naive self any longer. In this world, those at the top could rest on their laurels, toy with the weak, and gloat in self-satisfaction. Those kinds of people could make a move on Rio and the people precious to Rio at any time.

Sometimes, they would force cruel decisions to be made, which was why it was necessary to prepare oneself for the worst.

I can't run. And I can't turn back... So I should start moving forward already. This is a departure from the weakest part of me.

He wouldn't run anymore. He didn't *want* to run anymore. He had to accept the negative side of himself... In order to live. In order to protect others. He wouldn't begrudge himself for dirtying his hands.

Rio bit down on his lip and swore this to himself, then sneered at himself in a bitter but invigorated way.

I guess I'll head back to Strahl after a little while longer, he thought to himself.

On this day, Rio changed his former helplessness and bitterness into determination.

Chapter 5: To the Capital

Two days after Gon's punishment was decided, the time had finally come for the trade squad of Yuba's village to depart for the capital.

Despite the early hour of the morning, huge crowds of people had gathered in the village square, where several horse-drawn carriages were standing by. Among them was not only the trade squad, but Hayate's party as well.

Hayate's party was heading to the next neighboring village in the direction of the capital, so it was decided that they would accompany the trade squad part of the way. Furthermore, several of Hayate's attendants would be staying with the trade squad in order to escort the members of Gon's gang that would become slaves to the capital.

"Hurry! Make sure that none of the annual tax has been left unloaded! The carriage with the prisoners will bring up the rear. And to those escorting: be sure to not take your eyes off of them for even a moment," Hayate commanded his aides briskly from his horse.

A dozen or so people were running around in a flurry.

"Lord Hayate." Ruri addressed him from the ground beside his horse.

"Hm? O-Oh. Lady Ruri, how may I assist you?"

"Oh, no. I just wanted to express my gratitude for all that you've done to accommodate us, Lord Hayate. You didn't have to dismount from your horse."

Hayate had gotten off his horse in a hurry, which made Ruri laugh in amusement.

"A-Ah, no, well... It is fine. I did not do anything deserving of such gratitude — I simply fulfilled my duties as an official of this kingdom. If anything, you should be thanking Lord Rio. He was the one who noticed their intrusion on that night, after all."

"Yes, I'll definitely offer Rio my gratitude again later, but I won't be seeing you

again for some time. I couldn't prepare anything fancy, but if you could accept this..." Ruri stuck out her hand bashfully. It was something packed in a small bag.

"...What's this?" Hayate cocked his head curiously as he accepted it.

"It's an amulet for good health and warding off evil. I made it in a rush, so it's a little frayed..." Ruri said bashfully.

"O-Ooh! I am most indebted! I will treasure it greatly." Overcome with emotion, Hayate expressed his deepest gratitude.

"Ahaha, I'm glad you like it."

"Of course. It is the greatest gift one could hope to receive. I wish I could gift you something too, but I am most regrettably not in possession of such an item at this moment. I will bring one with me next time I visit."

"This is a gift to thank you for taking care of me, so I can't possibly accept anything else from you. Ah, but please, feel free to visit any time you like. An amulet is barely enough to make up for all you've done, but we'll always welcome you in our boring little village."

"O-Of course. Then, perhaps on my next vacation..." At Ruri's strained smile, Hayate hesitantly nodded his head.

"We'll be waiting for you. Ah, also, Granny wanted to give you something too—" Ruri suddenly remembered. She looked around for Yuba.

"I'm right here. Lord Hayate, there's a small favor I'd like to ask of you, if you'd care to lend an ear?" Yuba approached as though she had been awaiting her chance.

"Certainly. I will assist you to the best of my ability." Hayate nodded readily.

"Ruri, you go see Rio and Sayo off," Yuba said, creating an opportunity for Hayate and herself to be alone.

"Please hand this letter to your father, Lord Gouki," Yuba said, handing Hayate a rolled-up parchment with emphasis.

"To my father?"

“Yes. It is a very important letter, so I would appreciate it if you handed it over to him in person.”

“I see. Consider it done — I promise you I will deliver it with these very hands.” Hayate accepted the letter with a fierce nod and carefully tucked it away in his clothes.

“I am most grateful.”

“It is of no inconvenience to me, as I would have seen my father once I returned home anyway. For you to be using valuable paper for this, I can assume it must be of a serious matter. Please, leave it to me.”

“Indeed. Then please allow me to repay you at a later date. Let’s see... How about when Lord Hayate comes to visit Ruri?” Yuba said, the corners of her mouth turning up in a small grin.

“D-Did you hear what Ruri and I were saying earlier, by any chance? I-It is not that I am coming to see only Ruri, but I will look forward to it nevertheless,” Hayate said at an oddly rapid pace, sounding almost as though he was giving some kind of an excuse.

“Is that so? Well, that girl is already of age, and I would be more concerned if she remained an old spinster forever. It would be most fortunate if you could visit sooner rather than later.”

“A-As I said, Lady Ruri and I are not...”

Seeing Hayate’s faltering made Yuba huff with laughter and put on a smile. “Yes, so please come visit before she finds another to take her hand in marriage. It wouldn’t be good to come all the way here just to visit a married woman, after all.”

“Uh... That... is a good point.” Hayate widened his eyes and nodded with a strained smile. For some reason, he felt like he was just baited.

Meanwhile, a short distance away from Yuba and Hayate, Rio was talking to the two girls.

“Wow. It feels like so long since I’ve seen you in that outfit, Rio. You wore it when you arrived in the village... and a couple of times during your training, I

think?” Ruri commented in amazement at the sight of Rio fully decked out in his gear.

Rio had equipped the complete set of dwarven-made armor he received from the spirit folk village. He wore his black overcoat on top of everything else. During his stay in the village, he had rarely ever fully equipped himself, so it was just as Ruri had said.

“Come to think of it, it’s been over half a year since Sir Rio came to this village...” Sayo folded her fingers over as she counted off the months Rio had been with them.

“Time sure flies. Rio’s one of us villagers now.” Ruri nodded wholeheartedly, then bowed her head. “Rio, please protect Sayo and all of the villagers on your journey. Please,” she said with a serious expression.

“Yes, leave it to me.” Rio nodded his head with a faint smile.

“Thank you. And... I’m sorry.” Ruri said with a somewhat regretful face.

“For what?” Rio tilted his head, unsure of what she was apologizing for.

“I reflected on... what happened a few days ago. The more I thought about everything with a calm disposition, the more I realized I did something terrible to Rio. I thanked you, but I didn’t apologize. That’s why I wanted to say sorry before you left for the capital. I figured it’d be too late if I waited until you came back...”

Ruri explained her reason for apologizing with an expression that conveyed how unbearable she found her own emotions, when Sayo hurriedly cut in.

“U-Umm! In that case, I’d like to apologize to Sir Rio too!”

“No, Sayo. You tried to take action for Rio’s sake before you even thought of yourself. I wasn’t like that.” Ruri shook her head.

“T-That’s not tru—”

“Please wait a minute, you two,” Rio interrupted, sensing that the conversation was about to devolve into bickering. Ruri and Sayo both looked at Rio in unison.

“The root of the problem was my lack of consideration. I was so infuriated; I

couldn't see my surroundings and ended up scaring the two of you. That's why I should be the one to apologize," Rio said with a guilty expression.

"That's not true!"

"That is not true at all!"

Ruri and Sayo's strong objections overlapped with each other, as though they had planned it in advance.

Rio's eyes widened in shock for a moment, before he let out an amused laugh. "...Haha."

"W-What's so funny?" Ruri and Sayo exchanged glances bashfully.

"How about a handshake?" Rio said, suddenly offering his right hand out to the girls.

"Huh? A handshake?"

"A handshake of reconciliation. We all have things we refuse to concede to, but I would like to meet you two halfway in spite of that. So, let's shake on it. That way, with this, everything will return to normal," Rio said, leaving Ruri and Sayo both blinking blankly.

"Y-Yeah. Thanks, and sorry. I'm sorry, Rio..." Ruri came to her senses with a gasp and shook Rio's hand.

"Sayo, too. May we shake hands?" After his handshake with Ruri, Rio turned to address Sayo, who was still standing there in a daze.

"Huh?! ...Ah, y-yes! I-If that's all right with you!"

Sayo wiped her hand against her clothes and offered her right hand to Rio in a panic. Rio gave a faint grin and shook her hand, making Sayo immediately freeze with a flush, while Ruri watched the two of them with a pleasant smile on her face.

"...Take these, you two. They're amulets for good health and warding off evil."

After Rio let go of Sayo's hand, Ruri offered them the same amulet she had given Hayate.

“Thank you very much. I’ll treasure it.”

“T-Thank you, Ruri!”

Rio and Sayo gratefully accepted the amulets.

“Yup. Let’s hang out together again when you get back.” Ruri suggested.

“Yes, please,” Rio immediately agreed with a smile.

“Okay, have a good trip. Sayo, make sure you stay by Rio’s side. He’ll protect you no matter what.”

“Huh? O-Okay...” Sayo ducked her head in embarrassment.

“All right! It looks like Lord Hayate’s party is ready. Time to head out!” The leader of the trade squad, Dola, yelled out.

“Right, we’ll be off then. Let’s go, Sayo.”

“Y-Yes!” Rio began walking, Sayo on his heels.

After the other villagers had said their farewells, Rio and Sayo climbed into the horse-drawn carriage headed for the capital. Yuba, Ruri, and the other villagers all saw them off as the carriages finally departed from the village, proceeding down the road toward the capital with a clattering noise.

There was a risk of being attacked by bandits or wild animals while on the road, but the dozen or so villagers were all relatively geared for the occasion. Thankfully, their journey was uneventful, and they pulled up to the next village a little past noon.

Hayate’s party would be splitting off here, but several members of his squad would be remaining with the villagers in order to escort the criminals to the capital.

“Lord Hayate, thank you for everything you’ve done,” Rio called out and bowed. He descended from the horse-drawn carriage he had been riding on to give his parting words to Hayate.

Hayate dismounted from the horse in one smooth movement before brightly responding to Rio.

“No, I have been in your debt as well, Lord Rio. Let us sit down and have a

chat again when we have the opportunity. I would also like to spar with you once, if possible. If you ever visit the capital on another occasion, feel free to drop by my home. I would be glad to assist you if need be.”

“Thank you very much. I plan on leaving the village eventually, but I will make sure to stop by before I leave the kingdom.”

“I see... Is that so. I am a bit saddened to hear that, but fate will decide if we are destined to meet again. If anything happens on your way to the capital, please rely on my attendants. Be well.”

“Yes. You take care of yourself, too, Lord Hayate.”

Rio and Hayate exchanged lighthearted words and a firm handshake, then nodded at each other before they parted ways.

After that, the road to the capital continued to be peaceful, and the party proceeded down the road as a fall breeze blew around them.

Several days later, Rio and the others arrived at the capital.



Rio had arrived at the capital of the Karasuki Kingdom.

An enormous structure towered in the middle of the capital, its architecture resembling a Japanese-style castle. Equally large castle walls ran along its perimeter. As one would expect from the capital, the town that surrounded the castle was vast and spread out, bearing a population of tens of thousands of people.

With barely any opportunity to visit the capital, most villagers would get lost immediately. However, Rio’s party were directly led by Dola and Hayate’s aides to their destination: the lodging they would use for the duration of their stay. It went without saying that Hayate’s aides knew where to go, and Dola had apparently visited the capital numerous times before.

Their lodging was a shared accommodation facility managed by the kingdom that could house several dozen guests at once. Traveling merchants and villagers selling their own products, much like Rio’s party, were able to use the lodgings without interruption, so there was a fair demand for them. And

because they were renting the space, they had to do all the cooking and laundry themselves during their stay.

Eventually, the party secured a lodging and stopped their carriages.

“All right. We’ll be living here during our stay, so make sure you remember the location, and don’t get lost out there. Make sure you’re accompanied by someone who’s been to the capital before when you go out,” Dola said in a joking manner. Main roads aside, the smaller paths really were like a maze, so his words weren’t completely dismissible as a joke. The younger villagers laughed as they nodded, but the elder ones nudged them. “It’s no laughing matter,” they said.

Dola smiled wryly when he noticed that interaction.

“Okay. Now, I’m going to go out for a bit, so I’ll leave the unpacking of the cargo to you guys. Rio, could you come with me? And... Shin, you too.”

“Yes, sure.” Summoned by Dola, Rio and Shin made their way after him.

After they had walked for a while, Dola explained the reason he had called them out. “We’re going to have Lord Hayate’s subordinates accompany us to take Gon’s group to the internment camp. It’s possible they may require some kind of witness statement, but I’d prefer not to take Sayo, if possible. Sorry Rio, but I’d like you to come along. And you too, Shin, as Sayo’s brother. Is that all right?”

“If that’s all it is, then I don’t mind at all. Please let me see things through until the end.” Rio’s expression tensed as he gave a firm nod.

“Well, I *have* to see the final moments of the rotten bastard that attacked Sayo,” Shin also agreed with a hateful expression.

Thus, the three of them met up with Hayate’s attendants, who had been waiting a short distance away. Next to them was the carriage with Gon and the others.

“Right. Sorry to keep you waiting,” Dola said to Hayate’s aides.

“No, we don’t mind — this is our job. However, the internment camp is a fair distance away from here. We’d like to depart immediately so that we can arrive

before sundown.”

Under the guidance of Hayate’s aides, the party headed toward the internment camp. With their objective being what it was, the atmosphere was rather gloomy and quiet.

After walking for about thirty minutes, they finally arrived at their destination.

Located near the center of the capital was an area where the kingdom’s civil service office buildings were clustered. Once they stopped in front of one particularly large and sturdy-looking building, a security guard approached them. He asked about their business, to which Hayate’s attendant explained their situation. Thanks to that, the process went along smoothly and several officials and guards were called out of the building to release Gon and the others from the carriage.

“Get out!”

Once the door was open, a guard barked out an order to Gon and the others within. Knowing they would be cut down immediately if they tried to flee here, Gon’s group obediently appeared from within the carriage. Their hands were bound, restricting their movement greatly.

“...Eek!” The moment Gon spotted Rio among the crowd of people, he instinctively tried to back away in fright. However, a nearby guard used the pole of his spear to smack him on the head.

“No moving around!”

“Gah!”

The impact was strong enough for Gon to lose balance and topple over. He was restrained where he lay face down, the chained collar snapping shut around his neck.

“F-Fuck. Fuck this...” Gon’s voice was pathetic as his body shook.

Beside him, the men who had assisted Gon were unanimously denying their involvement and claiming they were deceived as the guards indifferently snapped collars around their necks, one after another.

Rio watched on, emotionless.

“Take them away — we will now conduct the necessary procedures. Follow us, please,” an official said to Rio and the others before heading inside.

The guards pulled the chains that were attached to the prisoners’ necks and entered the building with familiar strides.

“We should go, too.”

Dola gave a tired sigh and headed inside the building. Rio also took in a breath before walking forward, and Shin brought up the rear with rather nervous steps.

A surprisingly neat and tidy space welcomed them once they entered the building, with what looked like a reception desk directly opposite the door. Several merchant-like people were waiting in line.

“This place takes in not only criminal slaves, but regular slaves too. That’s why merchants come and go in order to purchase stock,” Dola explained to Shin, who was curiously looking around the room.

After that, Rio and the others were led to a waiting room, where they were told to stand by during the procedures. They waited for several minutes before the door of the waiting room opened.

“Sorry for the wait. But, thanks to the testimony that Lord Hayate provided, the judgment came much quicker than expected. The decision was settled — Gon will be a penal slave, while the others will be contract slaves for their debts,” Hayate’s subordinate said as he entered. He gave his report with a wry smile, feeling relaxed after the procedure had gone smoother than expected.

“Ooh, I’m glad to hear that. Why does it normally take longer?” Dola asked with wide eyes.

“Well, you see... Normally, even a criminal caught red-handed would undergo an informal trial to receive judgment, but the case was closed this time with just a document examination.”

“I see. In that case, please give Lord Hayate our deepest thanks when you see him again.”

“Of course — I shall let him know. Also, here is the victim compensation paid

out from Gon being taken into custody as a penal slave. It contains one gold coin,” Hayate’s aide said, holding out a small bag with the compensation money. A single gold coin was enough for an average household in the capital to live off for several months.

“Oh, wow... So much?” Dola’s eyes widened in shock.

“Well, he was an awfully burly man. His bounty was valued at the highest level.” Hayate’s subordinate shrugged with a wry smile.

“I see...”

“For the remaining contract slaves, you can either have them assessed and bought out immediately by the government office, or put them up for auction. Auctions do take both time and effort, but you could potentially get a much higher price than the instant buyout depending on the qualities of the slaves. Which will you go with?”

“In that case, please go with the buyout,” Dola chose without a moment’s hesitation.

“All right. Then, I shall inform them immediately. Please wait a bit longer until the assessments are done.” The aide nodded, then turned on his heel and left the room once again.

“Boss, is that really okay? Wouldn’t we be able to get more if we put them on auction?” Shin asked Dola.

“It’s fine. This method will cause less trouble in the future, and I don’t wanna see their faces anymore.” Dola replied frankly and shook his head.

“...Fine. It kinda feels anticlimactic, though.” Everything had proceeded so smoothly that Shin didn’t seem quite satisfied.

“Well, this is what it’s like when someone loses their humanity like that. You may not be used to it, but I’ll take you out for a good meal later so you can forget all of this and start anew,” Dola said to clear the strangely depressing atmosphere, ruffling Shin’s head roughly.

“S-Stop that, boss! Not in front of him!”

Shin glanced at Rio and resisted Dola in embarrassment, feeling overly aware

of the fact that he was being treated like a child. Rio chuckled with a smile as he watched the two of them in amusement.



By the time Rio and the others had collected their buyout money and left the internment center, the sun was already setting in the sky; most of the day had already passed them by.

“Since we’ve received the compensation money and all, let’s start heading back. I’ll buy you two some of the famous local *kamutan*!” Dola said on their way back to their lodgings.

“Ooh! Yeah!” Shin cheered happily.

“What’s... kamutan?” Rio asked, having never heard the word before.

“Oh, what? You’ve never had kamutan before?” Shin looked at Rio with a somewhat pleased expression.

“I haven’t. What kind of food is it?”

“I see. Well, how should I put it? It’s a steamy hot bowl of soup with long and thin noodles made of rice flour and wheat flower. You slurp it up, and it tastes great.”

At Rio’s earnest question, Shin gave a simple explanation of kamutan with a smug expression. He moved his hands, making the gesture of slurping noodles.

“...Hmm, that certainly seems good.” Rio could imagine what kind of food kamutan was by Shin’s explanation.

Noodles, huh? Ramen, soba, udon... No, it uses rice flour as well as wheat flour, so maybe it’s something like pho on Earth?

At any rate, his interest was piqued. Rio loved cooking and food in general more than anything, so he was immediately filled with the desire to try it as soon as possible.

“It doesn’t just *seem* good, it *is* good. You’ll see once you eat it.”

“You were really touched when you ate it for the first time, too. You even tried to get Sayo to make it for you after you got back to the village... She hadn’t

tried it before, so you two ended up fighting, if I recall correctly,” Dola teased Shin boastfully.

Shin recoiled in embarrassment, then flared up at Rio, who watched him in amusement. However, it wasn’t with a hostile attitude: Shin, who had previously avoided having conversations with Rio, was now able to hold proper conversations with him, despite being a tad bit blunt at times.

Perhaps he had a slight change of heart after Rio saved Sayo during the Gon incident.

The three of them chatted energetically as they made their way back to their lodgings. After handing the compensation money they received from the government office to the men waiting at their accommodations, they left once again to get a bite to eat. Since it was their first day in the capital and the fatigue of their journey lingered on, they decided to split into small groups and take turns getting food.

Thus, Rio, Shin, and Dola went out to eat kamutan as planned. They entered Dola’s recommended store, which was a ten minute walk away from their shared accommodation.

“Hey, please get us three large servings of kamutan. With extra meat, too,” Dola ordered with familiarity. A strong “You got it!” could be heard in response from the kitchen.

Minutes later, the rumored kamutan was done.

“Here ya go — three large servings of kamutan with extra meat! Thanks for waiting!” A waiter brought the bowls of kamutan over to Rio’s table cheerfully.

Rio had been asking the other two for more details about kamutan as they waited, but once he saw the real thing, he found it extremely similar to ramen.

However, as it was a food that had been eaten in the Kingdom of Karasuki since ancient times, it probably wasn’t the invention of a reincarnated person, as Liselotte had introduced pasta to the Strahl region, for example.

“It’s tradition to eat kamutan with hearty slurps,” Shin said proudly as he began to eat the noodles.

Rio dug into the steaming-hot kamutan with his chopsticks. First, he took a mouthful of soup; the flavor tasted similar to a light shoyu ramen soup. Next, he scooped up the noodles with practiced movements, and brought them to his mouth.

The noodles had a unique texture from the rice flour, but it was springy and elastic. The meat wasn't chashu, but it was seasoned appropriately and suited the noodles and soup well.

...It's good.

It had been a long time since he had eaten something similar to ramen. In actuality, if the noodles had been made from wheat, the soup altered a little, and with chashu, the kamutan would have been exactly the same as ramen.

I should try making ramen someday, Rio thought, his mouth turning up into a happy smile.



The next day, before noon...

Beneath the dazzling blue sky of the capital, Rio walked through the shopping district of the castle town with Sayo, having been requested to buy luxury items by the rest of the trade squad.

As for the others in the trade squad: some had gone out to sell their village's products, some were out buying large amounts of necessities, while others stayed behind to watch over their accommodations.

"There really are a lot of people in the capital," Sayo said curiously as she watched the road.

"Is this your first time in the capital?" Rio asked from where he was walking beside her.

"Yes. My brother has visited before, but I've always stayed at home. He would always tell me all sorts of stories, so I really wanted to see it for myself!"

"I heard about it. Shin pestered you to make kamutan and you two ended up fighting, or something?"

"Yeah. He just kept bragging about how he went to the capital, so I got a little

fed up. I can't make food I've never eaten before, so I got mad," Sayo said with a shy grin.

"Did you end up making it?"

"It didn't work out. It came out kinda slimy and sticky..."

"Soup aside, you need more than just rice flour and wheat flour to make the noodles. If you don't have the knowledge, it'd be impossible to make."

"Huh? Do you know how to make it, Sir Rio?"

"Yes. While it wasn't kamutan, I have made other noodles before."

"U-Umm... Could you teach me sometime, then?" Sayo asked cautiously.

"Sure, I wouldn't mind. Let's try making it together when we return to the village," Rio replied with a nod.

"Thank you very much! I actually haven't eaten it yet..."

"Then, how about we go eat it together after this? Since we're in the capital and all," Rio offered as a suggestion after Sayo had happily thanked him.

"Yes! I'd love to!" Sayo nodded enthusiastically.

"Let's keep an eye out for a restaurant while we're buying the items everyone requested."

With that, the two of them decided to go eat kamutan for lunch. Yet...

The store Dola took us to is far from here, so I don't know which store to go to... Rio thought without letting it show on his face. He wanted to take a chance so that Sayo could eat delicious food, but unfortunately, he had no experience visiting the Kingdom of Karasuki.

Perhaps this group matchup wasn't the best one for going shopping together... We don't even know where to find restaurants. It's Sayo's first time in the capital, too. We don't have any idea of what's around...

He had asked the members of the trade squad their reasoning behind grouping them this way before they left to go shopping, but they had forced it upon him for some unknown reason. Sure enough, the two of them had to walk around all morning in search of the items, comparing market prices and stock

quality.

It was more like they were sightseeing than shopping; fortunately, Sayo was in a good mood from being with Rio, and didn't seem particularly dissatisfied. She was innocently enjoying her time shopping.

Rio had been secretly worried the incident with Gon had left her traumatized, but Sayo showed no indication of such a thing as she willfully insisted on her own participation in the trade squad. It was reassuring.

"Sir Rio, why don't we just ask a local if there's a store they recommend?" Sayo said with a carefree smile.

"...You're right. Let's ask someone in the next store we go to." Rio set aside his needless worries and nodded, his smile small.

Well, as long as Sayo is having fun, he reasoned. Thankfully, the amount of luxuries they had to buy wasn't that much, so the two of them continued walking around the shopping district.

"You two youngins, over there. On a date, are we?" A young woman called out to Rio and Sayo. She seemed to be selling trinkets for women, and she had her stock set out on a mat in front of her.

"Huh? M-Me? Eh, ah, no... Erm..." Sayo tried to respond with something, confused. Sayo realized the merchant woman was talking to her and flushed bright red.

"We came to the capital to sell our village's products. It's just a shopping trip," Rio explained on behalf of the naive Sayo.

It was clear the merchant woman was trying to strike up a conversation for the sake of business. While it normally would have been best to ignore her and keep walking, Sayo had stopped with goodwill in mind, so it was a bit hard to leave now.

"I see. Is that so... Hmm..." The merchant woman nodded vaguely and looked at Sayo, who was still acting embarrassed. Sayo's cheeks turned scarlet under the woman's gaze, who seemed to see right through her.

"How about it, mister? A souvenir to remember your stroll through the capital

with such a cute lady by your side?” The woman grinned, turning to target Rio instead.

“T-That’s not true! And I’d feel bad! Ah, and we’re not on a date!” Sayo shook her head in a panic.

Rio glanced at the items lined on the mat. For a street stall, the items were arranged neatly and seemed to be of good quality.

“You’re a natural at this, miss. Sayo, is there anything you want?” Rio asked Sayo with a faint, wry smile.

He wanted to give her something as a small token of his gratitude for taking care of him, as well as to apologize for causing trouble during the Gon incident.

“Fweh... I-It’s all right! I couldn’t ask that of you!” Sayo stuck both her hands out in front of her and shook her head furiously. Her overreaction mimicked a small animal, making Rio laugh in amusement.

“There’s no need to hold back. I’ve been in your care, too, so it’s a thank you present.”

“He’s right. If a man offers to buy a woman a present, then it’s only polite to accept it. Go on, now — at least take a look.” At Rio’s offer, the merchant woman laughed and beckoned Sayo closer.

“Eh, ah... Then, just a look...”

Despite her bewilderment, Sayo decided to look at the items on display. She hesitated at first, but found the items were all to her liking, and a sparkle gradually appeared in her eyes.

“Anything interest you?”

“Erm, stuff like this one I think is cute...” At the merchant woman’s question, Sayo pointed to a flower hairpin that was simple, but cute.

“Ooh, you sure have a good eye, miss! That’s a one-of-a-kind.”

“Umm, is it expensive?”

“Hmm, let’s see. How does two silver coins sound?” The merchant woman asked somewhat cautiously.

Sayo had actually chosen one of the more expensive items available on display. It wasn't impossible for commoners to buy, but the price was enough to be quite a hit to the wallet if purchased without consideration.

"S-Silver coins?! S-Sir Rio, it's fine! I... I don't need it after all!"

As soon as Sayo heard the price, she declined the gift in shock. It was a great amount of money to an average village girl like her.

"I don't mind. If you like it, Sayo, I'll buy it for you." Rio showed no sign of concern for the price and expressed his willingness to purchase it.

"...Huh?" Sayo's eyes widened slightly.

"Ooh. You've got it, mister. But, maybe you should learn how to buy things at a market a bit better..." The merchant woman suggested in surprise.

However, Rio shook his head with a gentle smile.

"I don't back down because of the price when it comes to a gift for a girl. That price is fine."

"Ahaha, wonderful! Then, I should've made it a little more expensive, huh?" The woman laughed heartily.

"Is this the one you want, then, Sayo?" Rio took two silver coins from his wallet and checked with her one last time.

"Eh? Ah, b-but..."

Sayo hesitantly looked between the hairpin and Rio. The hairpin was extremely attractive, and the thought of receiving a present from Rio made her unbearably happy, but the price was high enough to scare her.

"I-I don't want it after all—" Just as Sayo tried to say that, Rio paid for the hairpin.

"Okay, miss. Give me that one, please."

It was clear from Sayo's reaction that she had taken a liking to this hairpin, so he went ahead and bought it anyway. Knowing Sayo's personality, he figured she would've rejected him if he hadn't done it this way.

Sayo watched Rio hand over the money with a dazed expression.

“Thanks for the purchase! Would you like a box to protect it, or do you want to put it on right away?” The merchant picked up the hairpin and a box. She stood up and approached Sayo.

“Eh, ah, umm... Y-Yes please!”

“Here, I’ll put it on for you. Stay still for a moment.” Sayo nodded timidly as the merchant woman put the hairpin in her hair. She froze in a dream-like trance as the hairpin was set in place for her.

“It suits you so well! Don’t you think so, too, mister?” the woman asked after fixing the hairpin to Sayo’s loosely tied hair.

“Yes, I think it’s lovely,” Rio agreed with a smile.

“T-Thank you very much! Really, Sir Rio.” Sayo finally returned to her senses and bobbed her head at Rio furiously.

“Not a problem. Shall we go, now? We still have other things to buy.” Rio shook his head, then suggested they went on their way. However, he suddenly remembered something, and asked the woman about kamutan.

“...Oh, that’s right. Miss, do you know of any good kamutan stores around here?”

“If it’s kamutan you’re after, then the food and dining stores are gathered toward that area over there. There’s a store called Kuma that’s quite reputable. It gets very crowded during lunch, so it’d be best to set aside some time when you go,” she replied, pointing toward the area where the restaurants were located.

“I see. Thank you very much.”

“Of course. I did sell something good, after all.” The merchant woman shook her head, then approached Sayo at a jog’s pace and whispered in her ear with a wink. “...Ah, Miss Sayo, wasn’t it? You have to do your best to win him over. This boy seems like quite the catch.”

“?!” Sayo looked down and flushed.

“Well, then! Please come again, if you ever have the chance to!” The merchant woman stepped away from Sayo and bid them farewell with a smile.

“Will do. Let’s go, Sayo.” Rio had been watching the two of them talk silently, but at the merchant woman’s farewell, he responded with a faint smile of his own. Then, he gestured at Sayo, and began walking.

Sayo started to walk after him, but turned back to bow at the merchant woman before she left. The woman waved with a smile.

There was a spring in Sayo’s steps as she hurried to catch up to Rio.



After they ate kamutan at the store the merchant woman recommended, Rio and Sayo returned to the shopping district to resume their shopping for luxuries.

The main road had shops lining both sides, with a row of stalls down the middle that split the road into two. With plenty of pedestrian traffic, the road was crowded with the bustle of all kinds of people. Among them, Rio and Sayo were allowing the crowd to sweep them along, looking at the stores as they walked by them.

“T-There are even more people now.”

“It’s past noon, after all. More people are coming out after eating lunch. If you see a good store, let’s go inside.” They spoke as they walked, when...

“How dare you!” an angry voice yelled.

“Kya!” Sayo’s timid frame trembled with a flinch.

After a moment, confused voices began to stir around them.

“What? What is it?”

“Is it a fight? What’s going on?”

“Damn, I can’t see.”

“Hey, it looks like the mercenaries are messing with a woman and her kid.”

“No way!”

And so on. The chatter grew louder.

Rio enhanced his hearing ability with spirit arts to pick up on fragments of the

conversation, before he heard angry voices from down the road once again.

“Insolent brat! Watch where you’re walking!”

“The rude one here is you, mere mercenary! Just who do you think you’re addressing?!” It seemed like a man and woman were arguing; a man’s gruff yelling voice and a woman’s dignified but enraged voice could be heard in that order. Following the outburst, from the same direction of the argument, a girl’s cute voice could be heard.

“Kya?!”

And then, after a beat: “What are you doing?!”

“Lady Komomo!”

“Oi, wait!” the woman’s uneasy voice said. It seemed as though the situation was turning into a crisis, but Rio couldn’t see anything from where he was.

“Move it!” A man’s voice could be heard some distance away; the crowd standing before Rio suddenly parted down the middle. Down that newly-made path a single mercenary-like man came running. He held a dagger in his right hand and a young girl tucked under his left arm as he ran, all the while threatening those who were in his way. The girl was unconscious, her head loosely hanging down.

“Move! Move it!” The man yelled in anger.

“Ah...” Perhaps she feared the man approaching her from the front, as Sayo stood still, unable to move. She had just been assaulted by Gon a few days prior, so her reaction was understandable.

“Tch.” The approaching man saw Rio and Sayo standing still in his path, and clicked his tongue. He decided to disregard them, and charge ahead anyway. However, without drawing his sword from the sheath at his waist, Rio leaped out in front, empty-handed. He then braced himself ready to receive the man’s body, unarmed.

At first, he dodged the man’s hand, which held a thrust-out dagger. Then, he skillfully knocked the man’s feet out from underneath him; his body spun once in the air. The man looked dazed.

Rio grabbed the girl from under the man's arm and brought her closer to him, tucking her under his arm instead and driving his fist into the man's solar plexus at the same time. Immediately, the man's body collapsed on the ground.

"Guh..." The man let go of the dagger and slumped over, unconscious. It was all over in a flash.

"W... Woaaaaa!" The crowd was stunned for a moment, before they burst into cheers.

Looks of admiration were thrown in Rio's direction; he gave a forced smile and ignored the attention, checking on the girl under his arm instead.

The girl was still young — around ten years old, it seemed. Her face was extremely refined, making her a very cute girl indeed.

She's just knocked out. Either took a blow that knocked her out, or she was drugged into this state. Or, maybe it was done with sleeping spirit arts...

Rio briefly searched the flow of essence within the girl's body and found no traces of tampering, so he decided it was most likely one of the first two options. Just in case she had been drugged, he cast a detoxifying spirit art as well.

There should be no fear for her life, now, at least. Next is...

After taking the necessary precautions with the girl, Rio glanced over at Sayo, who was staring blankly at him.

"Sayo. Are you all right?" Rio asked with a slightly awkward smile.

"Y-Yes! I'm fine." Sayo returned to her senses and nodded furiously.

"Lady Komomo?!"

A woman appeared — she saw Rio carrying the girl named Komomo, with the sight of the kidnapper collapsed on the ground next to him, and immediately understood what was going on. She ran over to Rio in a hurry, and Rio offered the girl he was carrying in his arms to the woman.

"Here you go. She's been knocked out, but her life shouldn't be in danger."

"I-I am sorry for the trouble. Thank you very much. If only I were more

capable..." The woman took Komomo and bowed her head with a regretful expression.

"If you want to apologize to someone, save it for that girl when she wakes up. This man is unconscious right now... What would you like to do?" Rio asked. He shook his head and picked up the man's dagger from the ground and held it out to the woman.



“As soon as the security guards get here, I’ll let them escort him to the internment center and make him confess who he was working for.”

“I see... Well, it seems like the guards have just arrived.” As the two spoke, guards that had heard the commotion came running.

Rio heard them asking what had happened and looked at them, which drew the woman’s attention to them.

“Over here!” she yelled.

Rio took that chance to approach Sayo. “Let’s go, Sayo,” he said, taking her by the hand and pulling her along as he started to walk off.

“Eh? Ah, but... Are you sure?”

“Yes. I’d like to stay out of any trouble, if possible,” Rio said with a bitter smile at Sayo’s confusion.

“Ah, wait! Hold on!” The woman whose name he didn’t know called out in a fluster from behind him as she realized they were leaving. However, Rio took Sayo and promptly disappeared into the crowd of people.

After that, they somehow managed to finish their shopping by evening, and returned to their lodgings. Once they went inside, the women of the squad immediately took notice of the hairpin in Sayo’s hair, then hounded Sayo with questions, until she turned bright red, as she usually did.

Rio managed to get away before he got involved by pretending to talk about the day’s sales with the other men. The sales were going well, and they expected to depart for the village within a few days.

That estimation was on the mark, as Rio and the others left for the village several days later. Thus, their trades at the capital ended safely, and their journey back to the village proceeded without incident.



Just as Rio and the others arrived back at the village, Hayate had also finished his duties and returned to the capital. After storing the land tax in the royal castle’s storehouses, he went straight home to the Saga family’s mansion.

As he went through the gates of his family home, the retainers of his house came out to greet him. The head of the Saga family — his father, Gouki — had ordered him to see him immediately upon his return. Hayate had intended on doing so anyway in order to greet him upon his return. However, he noticed the air around the family retainers was rather tense.

“Did something happen?” he asked one of them. Once he had been told that his little sister, Komomo, had nearly been kidnapped, he hurried to Gouki’s room without bothering to change.

“Excuse me, father. It is Hayate. I have just returned home.”

“Hm... Enter. Have you heard yet?” Gouki granted Hayate permission to enter his room, then immediately cut to the chase once they were facing each other.

“Yes — that Komomo was nearly kidnapped.”

“They got us good. Aiming for the only day of the month Komomo secretly goes to the market for field study,” Gouki uttered, vexed.

“Are you saying that the crime was planned in advance?” Hayate questioned.

“Indeed. The apprehended perpetrator confessed. Apparently, one of the servants in our house leaked the information. I’ve an idea regarding the mastermind behind it, but I lack proof. So, I’ve decided to conduct a sting operation to capture the servant. We should get results immediately,” Gouki reported on the situation indifferently, letting a cold and dark smile peek through.

“I see your response is as quick as always. How is Komomo...?”

“Happy and healthy in mind and body. She’s been devoting herself to training day and night because of her embarrassment.”

“I see. Miss Aoi has done well.”

Hayate sighed in relief to hear that his little sister Komomo was healthy. While they may have let someone make the first move, the Saga family’s bodyguards were excellent, reliable, and trustworthy.

For the record, Aoi was Komomo’s personal attendant, and the person in charge of protecting her and her surroundings. Because Aoi accompanied

Komomo absolutely everywhere, Hayate assumed the one that saved Komomo had been Aoi.

“Actually, an unknown boy was the one that saved Komomo and apprehended the perpetrator. One with splendid skills, at that.” Gouki corrected Hayate with an expression that conveyed he was at a complete loss.

“Oh? What a wonderful person he must be. I would love to pay him a visit and express my gratitude. Where might I find him?” Impressed, Hayate inquired after his whereabouts without thinking.

“As I said, it was an unknown boy. One who disappeared immediately, that is. We have no idea who or what he is.” Gouki sighed listlessly and shook his head.

“That... is a problem.”

“Indeed — it’s a problem. We can’t even thank him. Well... That’s all I have to inform you of for now. Has anything changed on your side?”

“No, there have been no signs of anyone targeting me as of yet...”

“I see.”

Hayate placed a hand against his mouth in thought, then recalled the letter tucked into his chest pocket and took it out. “...Oh, but there *is* something. This is unrelated to Komomo, but Lady Yuba entrusted me with a letter for you, father.”

“Oh? From Lady Yuba, you say. Let me have a look.”

Gouki accepted the letter from Hayate and opened it with a refined gesture that was unsuited to his stern physique. He then unrolled the scroll, shifted his center of gravity, and stared intently at the letter.

It’s hard to believe there is anyone so foolish as to wrong this family with my father as the head...

As Gouki read the letter, Hayate contemplated over Komomo’s kidnapping attempt.

Gouki was a renowned military figure, said to be the strongest in the Kingdom of Karasuki and feared for his second name, the Fierce God Gouki. There were tales of how he once caused ten thousand enemies to tremble in the war with

the neighboring Kingdom of Rokuren.

He was generally strict with his family, too, especially during Hayate's training, which was a time when he truly acted like a demon. However, he was much softer in front of his daughter, Komomo.

As Hayate was lost in such thoughts, Gouki muttered his name.

"...Hayate."

His voice was wavering slightly. No, not just his voice — the hands that clutched the letter, and his boulder-like body, were both faintly trembling.

He had evidently been shaken by something.

"Y-Yes. What is it?" Hayate asked in a high-pitched voice, his eyes widening in surprise.

"And so, you met Sir R-... I mean, a boy named Rio?" Gouki asked about Rio for some reason.

"Yes. We interacted during my stay at Lady Yuba's residence..."

"What kind of boy was he?"

"...He had a good-natured personality. Gentle and polite, he was a very serious boy. He seemed to be a practitioner of martial arts, as his skills showed. He was most certainly a person of interest. I almost wanted to invite him to our family, if he was not serving anyone else. I believe you would have liked him, too, father." Despite finding the question strange, Hayate spoke about his impression of Rio honestly.

"Fool. You've no idea..." Gouki muttered with a huff, but it was too quiet to reach Hayate's ears.

"Yes?" Hayate tilted his head.

Gouki chuckled to himself with a grin and stood up straight. "I will be taking Kayoko out of the house for a while. You wait on the estate with Komomo."

With that, Gouki walked out of the room.

"...What was that about?" Hayate muttered in a daze to no one in particular, now alone in the room.

Chapter 6: To the Capital Once More

Several days passed since Rio and the others returned to the village.

The trades had gone well, the villagers' pockets were filled, and everyone had smiles on their faces. Now, it was finally time for the harvest festival, where they would pray for abundant harvests in the next year.

It was still the middle of the day, yet the men had gathered in the village square to start drinking. The women that took pride in their cooking skills had prepared a feast in the meeting hall and their individual house kitchens; they used assistants to carry the dishes to the village square, and the children of the village were eating everything up with enthusiasm.

As for Rio, he had used the village chief's kitchen to make most of his specialty recipes, and was in the middle of preparing a feast with Ruri and Sayo. He was making meat pie, apple pie, and a prototype of the kamutan he had promised Sayo.

Since no one in the village knew how to make the noodles for kamutan, and meat pie and apple pie weren't dishes that were eaten in the Karasuki Kingdom to begin with, Rio took the lead with Ruri and Sayo's assistance. Naturally, the kamutan noodles were all homemade, and had been prepared two days in advance. Two enormous pots had been placed over the hearth, one with shoyu soup and one with miso soup simmering inside.

"Wow — it smells great. We'll really be able to eat kamutan..." Ruri sniffed at the aroma wafting from the pot with a blissful expression.

"I've only made it a few times myself, so I'm sort of an amateur. It might be a different method compared to how it's made in the capital... The soup was made experimentally, too, so I don't have much confidence in its taste either," Rio said a bit worriedly.

"It's fine! I'm sure everyone will ask for seconds. From what I taste-tested, the soup seems delicious."

“That’s right — they’ll definitely want you to make it again. Or rather, they’ll want to make it themselves!”

Both Ruri and Sayo spoke with certainty.

“It takes quite a lot of effort and ingredients, but you’re right. I want to make it again... Although, I may never be able to make the same soup again...” Rio nodded with a happy smile. He didn’t know if he’d still be in the village this time next year, but he hoped to be able to make kamutan again as a group of three.

After letting the soup simmer for a little under an hour, they carried the pre-prepared noodles and baked pies together to the square. When the villagers found out Rio had made kamutan, they swarmed around him.

He reheated the soup on a makeshift cooking stove made from spirit arts at a corner of the square, and boiled the noodles. When the villagers tasted the completed kamutan, they all yelled “It’s delicious!” one after another.

Rio looked at all their faces and decided it had been worth all his hard work. His features crinkled happily. The meat pie and apple pie were a huge hit too.

Before long, Rio and the girls joined in on the feast, enjoying the food and drink as they watched people sing and dance cheerfully at the center of the square. It was a warm gathering that was constantly filled with laughs.

However, when evening approached...

...Hm?

Rio suddenly took the spirit stone out of his pocket. A spell formula had appeared on the surface of the stone, and it was emitting a strong light and heat.

This spirit stone was the core of the intruder detection barrier Rio had modified to cover the whole village after the Gon incident. He normally deactivated it during the day, when the villagers passed in and out so frequently, but he had turned it on just in case during the feast.

Who could it be? A traveler, a merchant, a guest... It’s coming from the east side. Rio suddenly stood up, ignoring all the partying villagers.

The spirit stone emitted a stronger light in the direction of the intruder, so he

quietly walked off in that direction. On his way, he muttered the “*Dissolvo*” spell and retrieved his sword and sheath from the Time-Space Cache. After walking away from the village square for several minutes, he arrived at the fields that spread across the east side of the village and encountered a dozen or so men and women enshrouded in travel attire. He couldn’t detect any hostility, but they were all fully equipped and showed no signs of weaknesses. They seemed to be experienced practitioners of martial arts.

“Do you have business here?” Rio cautiously asked the unfamiliar party.

When the party spotted Rio with his sword in hand, they showed faint signs of wariness, but the middle-aged man and woman in the lead were staring at Rio with a slightly different look in their eyes.

“...My name is Saga Gouki. Pardon me, but may I ask your name? Could you perhaps be Sir Rio?” The man in the lead introduced himself as Gouki, before asking for Rio’s name.

As soon as Rio heard the Saga family name, he immediately recalled Hayate, who he had become acquainted with just recently. Perhaps this was his father, Rio thought.

“That is correct... Would you perhaps be Lord Hayate’s father?” Rio replied.

“So it *is* you, Sir Rio! It is an honor to be in your great presence.”

Overcome with emotion, Gouki kneeled on the spot. No, not just Gouki — the others around him also knelt before Rio at once, showing no concern for the state of their clothes at all.

“Y-Yes?” Unable to comprehend the situation, Rio was taken aback. “Erm, we haven’t met before, right...? Have you mistaken me for someone else? If you could all stand up first, I’d appreciate it...” he said after a beat.

“There is no mistake. Sir Rio, both my wife Kayoko beside me and I once graciously served your mother: Karasuki Ayame,” Gouki said, shaking his head adamantly.

“Karasuki... Ayame?” Hearing his mother’s name along with her family name made Rio freeze.

“Your surprise is most understandable, but your mother was indeed royalty in the Kingdom of Karasuki. I have come to visit you on this occasion after receiving a letter from Lady Yuba... the mother of my close friend, Zen.”

The words coming from Gouki’s mouth were facts that were overwhelmingly shocking. Regardless of whether or not he should be believed, Rio’s rational thinking had come to a complete stop.

“...For now, allow me to guide you to the village chief’s house. Then, I shall go fetch Yuba, and you can tell me your story from the beginning. Would that be all right? Please, stand up,” Rio somehow managed to say.

Even if no one was around because of the banquet, the fields weren’t the right place for this conversation, and he needed some time to calm down.

“I understand. Then, if you would please excuse our intrusion.” Gouki and the others nodded and solemnly stood to their feet.

“Please, come this way.” With a small sigh, Rio started leading them. Gouki’s party followed him in a nearly reverent manner.

After guiding them to the village chief’s house, Rio made his way to the square with haste and found Yuba talking to the other villagers. He whispered into her ear, explaining the situation. Despite her surprise, Yuba immediately understood, and smiled.

“...I see. All right — let’s go, Rio,” she gently said to him.

The two immediately made their way to the village chief’s house. They barely exchanged any words on the way, but as the house came into view, Yuba suddenly opened her mouth.

“...Rio, no matter what, you will always be my grandchild. Nothing can change that. At least, that’s what I believe. It may seem sudden, but I wanted to tell you this now.”

“Yuba... Yes, I feel the same way.” Rio had sensed that Gouki’s earlier words had more or less been the truth.

“Thank you. Shall we go inside?” Yuba asked with a somewhat happy grin, before stepping into the house.



In the living room of the village chief's house, Rio, Yuba, Gouki, and Gouki's wife Kayoko, were facing each other. The attendants Gouki had brought along were guarding the premises in order to ensure that no one would overhear their discussions.

Gouki and Kayoko knelt, side by side. "Sir Rio, please accept our sincerest apologies for putting this unexpected shock upon you out of the blue," they said, bowing deeply.

"No, there's no need to apologize for that..." Rio shook his head in borderline confusion.

"Lord Gouki, may I assume that your presence here means you have obtained the appropriate permissions?" Yuba asked Gouki on Rio's behalf.

"Indeed. We are not here of our own accord, but under the order of His Majesty." Gouki nodded firmly.

"I see. Then, please tell him everything."

Yuba seemed relieved — the truth could finally be revealed. It was the same feeling as if an evil had been vanquished.

"Of course — that is why we are here. Both His and Her Majesty wish to extend their gratitude and apologies to Lady Yuba for all the suffering you must have endured up until now."

"I am honored." Yuba lowered her head gratefully.

"Indeed," Gouki nodded at Yuba. "...Now, Sir Rio. May I tell you the story of what happened to Princess Ayame and Zen, my close friend?" he asked Rio.

"...Yes. Please." Rio stared at Gouki and agreed.

Then, Gouki slowly began to speak.

"The story begins 12 years ago... But first, let me tell you about the relationship between me and Zen — your father. Lady Yuba can fill you in on anything that happened before that, though..." Gouki said, looking at Yuba.

"Zen was an awkward child, but he was kind and clever nonetheless. We were

at war with the neighboring Kingdom of Rokuren at the time, so every village was going through tough times. As the second son, Zen decided to leave and reduce the number of mouths to feed, and went off one day to voluntarily enlist as a soldier.” Yuba spoke of Zen from before Gouki was acquainted with him with a somewhat nostalgic smile.

“Zen had a natural talent for anything related to spirit arts and military arts. On top of that, it was the middle of a war period, as Lady Yuba said. He started as a mere soldier, but soon distinguished himself and achieved feats worthy of His Majesty’s attention. And so, His Majesty granted him the rank of a warrior. That was when I met Zen.”

It was tradition in the Karasuki Kingdom for newly-appointed warriors to face off with their predecessors. In this case, it was Gouki who had sparred with Zen. Although Gouki was much younger at the time, he was one of the leading warriors in terms of skill in the kingdom. And yet, despite Zen being self-taught, Gouki struggled to come out on top in their battle.

“It was only a sparring match, but there weren’t many opponents that could make my heart leap like Zen did. His abilities were the real deal. That was why I strongly recommended him as a bodyguard for the royal family. As you know already, that royal family member was Princess Ayame.”

“Mom... My mother was royalty...” Rio muttered, not quite processing the reality of that fact yet.

“Princess Ayame wasn’t high in succession for the throne, but she was renowned even in the neighboring kingdoms as the beauty of Karasuki,” Gouki said with a huff, a pleasant smile on his face.

“My Lord, that’s disrespectful,” Kayoko muttered in a cold voice, having maintained her silence beside Gouki the entire time.

“R-Right. Anyhow, that was how Zen became Princess Ayame’s bodyguard.” Gouki changed the subject in a hurry.

While Zen had no faults in terms of his militaristic prowess, the fact he was a mere villager had caused a few outcries.

“There were many who didn’t want to leave the protection of royalty to a

commoner that was rising up in the world. Abilities aside, he lacked education and social status. That being said, Princess Ayame also had Kayoko and I as her guards, so we were able to beat all the necessary education into him. Most importantly, Princess Ayame herself had taken a liking to him...”

Zen had taken the position as Ayame’s bodyguard without any issue.

“If I may dare to say, to someone like Princess Ayame, who had a sheltered upbringing, Zen was an embodiment of the outside world. She would ask Zen everything about what life was like in his village.”

Ayame found herself drawn to Zen in no time at all. Anyone looking on could see what had happened with ease. Similarly, Zen also found himself drawn to Ayame as time went on.

That being said, Ayame was still a princess, and though Zen had been promoted to a warrior, he was still a former farmer. Because of that, the gap between their statuses was too great, and Zen chose to conceal his feelings.

“Actually, Princess Ayame secretly visited the village a number of times. Zen desperately tried to stop her, insisting that there was nothing to see in his village, but Princess Ayame refused to budge. We were all at our wits’ end.”

“So... Something like that happened...” Rio said, listening intently to the beginnings of his parents’ relationship.

In the meantime, Gouki was chuckling heartily at the memories he’d conjured up. Then, he suddenly regained his serious expression.

“That was when the Kingdom of Rokuren came forth with a peace treaty during a lull in the war.”

Peace treaties weren’t particularly rare occurrences; in fact, several had already been formed during the long warring years between the Karasuki and Rokuren kingdoms. The two kingdoms had a long history with each other; the Rokuren Kingdom had incited the war to begin with, but needlessly prolonging a war was undesirable for the kingdom’s economy and did not fare well with the citizens. This was what lead the Karasuki Kingdom to accept the peace treaty.

And so, to celebrate the treaty and to quell civilian unrest, a great festival was held in the capital of Karasuki, with the prince of Rokuren attending as an

ambassador. The ceremony itself progressed peacefully, and the peace treaty was formed without issue. All that was left was for the prince of Rokuren to return home, and the temporary time of peace would begin.

However, on the night of his return, an incident occurred: someone tried to kidnap Ayame after she had retired for the night. However, Zen had been guarding Ayame from the shadows, and was able to apprehend the perpetrator before he succeeded.

It was revealed that the kidnapper was an attendant of the Rokuren prince.

Zen immediately tried to have him explain why he was putting the peace treaty that had just been established at risk, but the perpetrator used a secret weapon that had been prepared in advance to kill himself first. After that, the castle immediately burst with activity, despite it being the middle of the night. An emergency meeting was held between the leaders of Karasuki and the ambassador of Rokuren. The Karasuki Kingdom requested an explanation of the events at said meeting, but the Rokuren prince refused to comply, and instead reacted with indignation that his attendant was kidnapped and killed.

From the Karasuki Kingdom's point of view, it was the Rokuren side that had attempted the kidnapping, the perpetrator was dead, and the bodyguard — Zen — was the only one at the scene of the crime. On top of that, Ayame herself had been asleep in her room. Still, there wasn't enough evidence to impeach the Rokuren Kingdom.

Meanwhile, the Rokuren side was also lacking evidence, but the prince used the fact his attendant was dead as a means to stubbornly insist that their trust was betrayed. Negotiations between the two parties was inevitably soured, and there was no choice but to break the newly-formed peace treaty.

"The Kingdom of Rokuren established additional conditions: Zen's execution, and a political marriage between the Rokuren prince and Princess Ayame. With that, they would forgive the death of the attendant, and maintain their side of the peace treaty. Even looking back on it now, it still makes my blood boil," Gouki said, his body trembling with rage.

If everything was indeed as Gouki had said, then Rokuren's demands were completely brazen and shameless. Rio grimaced without realizing it. He could

only from his own assumptions of the political background of the time from Gouki's words, but apparently, there had been rumors of how the sociable Rokuren prince was cruel and philandering. If someone like that were to marry Ayame in a political marriage... Well, it wasn't a positive thought.

At any rate, while the Rokuren side's demands sounded completely ridiculous, it was part of diplomacy to consider even the most ridiculous of requests seriously. Furthermore, the Rokuren Kingdom distorted the truth of the peace treaty being ruined and spread it throughout the streets, manipulating the emotions of the citizens and society as a whole. The citizens of the capital grew anxious, which rapidly deteriorated into discontent, and even resulted in a few protests. Even within the Karasuki royal castle, there were a significant amount of court nobles that opposed the war. The authority of the king may have been able to suppress that discontent, but it would have only been on the surface. The Karasuki Kingdom had lost the first hand, and was now cornered into a disadvantageous position.

"That being said, there was no guarantee that the Rokuren Kingdom would quiet down even if we accepted their terms. At the same time, revoking the peace treaty that had just been established and resuming the war instead would have made civilian unrest reach explosive levels, ruining the morale of the kingdom. We had to make a move to turn the tables on such a hopeless situation. That was why His Majesty pretended to agree to the demands in order to buy time. In the end, he gave the order for Zen to take Ayame and flee the kingdom."

While it wasn't much, they were able to buy time within the country this way. In the meantime, the king and several of his chief vassals devised a secret plan to execute.

"His Majesty selected the best of the best to form a small troop of warriors that would act in secret, and dispatched them to the Rokuren Kingdom. Then, he made an official announcement that Zen had taken Princess Ayame and fled."

Of course, the prince of Rokuren was enraged by that. "You've toyed with the wrong man!" he had said as he returned to his kingdom and proudly declared war.

At the same time, the discontent within the country was directed toward Zen and Ayame for running away instead. It was simply too irresponsible of them. There was no choice but to capture them and make them take responsibility for their actions.

However, the sparks of war were already alight. The opposing parties within the Karasuki Kingdom reluctantly agreed to mobilize their armies and began their advance into the Rokuren Kingdom. In response to the Karasuki army's movement, the great army of the Rokuren Kingdom was also mobilized. Then, the two armies met each other at the kingdom border in a stand-off.

It was at this time that the elite squad of a select few Karasuki warriors made their move, amongst which Gouki was included. They launched a surprise attack on the amassed Rokuren army troops from behind, their goal being to take the head of the senior officers.

The elite squad consisted of warriors with the greatest amount of loyalty toward the royal family. They had all amassed great ill will toward the Rokuren kingdom from the entire situation. Thus, their dauntless assault began while their troop morale was at its peak.

The warriors stormed into the heart of the enemy camp in no time at all, and dropped the heads of the enemy generals as they were in the middle of a meeting, one by one. Furthermore, they captured the Rokuren prince, who was among them. As a result, the first battle was won with only a surprise attack — it was a historically successful victory.

“The Rokuren army dispersed and fled after they lost their prince and some of their generals, which raised the morale of our troops higher than it had ever been... It was almost as though opposition toward the war had been a lie. Then, our army advanced forward before the Rokuren army could reform itself, and we secured several important bases in succession. Thus, the Kingdom of Rokuren quickly surrendered.” Gouki spoke about the situation back then with a pleasant expression.

As Rokuren was the one that surrendered, they entered the status of being a defeated kingdom. Rather than a peace treaty, Karasuki was able to set advantageous conditions for itself as the victorious kingdom. With so many of

those conditions one-sidedly forced upon the other side, Karasuki prospered. The citizens' discontent was dispersed in no time.

“However, while the result may have been an overwhelming victory, the fact was, we had crossed a dangerous bridge. The events that led up to the start of the war were filled with deception and lies, and if we warriors had made any errors, the war could have gone in their favor. More than anything, the fact that His Majesty had ordered Zen and Princess Ayame to flee was simply too damaging. The two of them were officially treated as felons for willingly running away together and causing the start of the war.”

And so, the two of them lost their place in the Yagumo region. At the same time, the social barrier between Zen and Ayame had also been removed. It was ironic.

“At the time, His Majesty was aware that Princess Ayame had fallen for Zen, and that Zen felt the same way toward Princess Ayame. However, there was no way for the two to be together if Zen remained as Princess Ayame's bodyguard. While they may have been able to shoot down the Rokuren prince's demands for a new plaything, she would inevitably end up in a political marriage with an undesirable partner. And so, His Majesty decided he would rather entrust her to Zen instead. As a result, His Majesty has always been plagued with apprehension over whether or not that was the correct choice...”

After the war, the king of Karasuki had sent out a wanted list to neighboring kingdoms with Zen and Ayame's names on it. Furthermore, to completely hide the truth, he placed a gag order on the few who were in on the situation. Only Yuba was informed because of her status as Zen's mother, but she too was forbidden to speak. That was why she was unable to tell Rio the truth.

“We have lingering regrets, too. Kayoko and I have always blamed ourselves for being unable to accompany Princess Ayame...” Gouki said with a shameful expression.

Gouki and Kayoko were already married at the time, and Kayoko was carrying Hayate in her stomach. It simply wasn't feasible for her to endure the harsh life of being on the run while pregnant.

Furthermore, by having Gouki and Kayoko remain, the circumstances would

make Zen and Ayame's elopement seem much more authentic.

And yet, the two of them were Ayame's bodyguards. Of course, they did not regret giving birth to Hayate, but the question of whether they should have forced themselves to go along with Ayame had always lingered in the air.

"But then, just the other day, I received a letter from Lady Yuba that informed me of Sir Rio's presence, and that he had come from a far away land in search of clues about his parents."

If the news had come from anyone else, Gouki might not have believed them, but the one who had relayed the information was Rio's grandmother; her words had a much higher level of authenticity. That was why Gouki had brought Kayoko along to seek a decision from the king. He had given them the responsibility of revealing the truth if Rio was truly Ayame's son.

"I was overcome with emotion the moment I laid my eyes upon you, Sir Rio. The traces of Princess Ayame and Zen are most pronounced in your features. That was how I was certain — there was no mistake of you being Princess Ayame's son."

Rio personally felt it was a little hasty of him to think that way, but perhaps it simply meant that he was that similar to Ayame. Zen, too. He couldn't remember Zen's face, but even when he tried to look back on his childhood, there were memories of Ayame's face he still couldn't quite put together.

"His Majesty the king and Her Highness the queen — in other words, Princess Ayame's parents — wish to meet with you. Sir Rio, would you please consider traveling to the capital with me?"

"The two of them... want to meet me..."

The other party were the people who should be Rio's grandmother and grandfather, but it honestly didn't feel quite real — he didn't even know their faces, after all. But, since they were Ayame's parents, he did feel the desire to meet them himself.

And anyway, he didn't think they would back down so easily if he rejected them now.

Rio took a deep breath to calm himself. "I understand," he agreed in a slightly

stiff voice.

A smile of relief lit up on Gouki's face. "Thank you very much for your acceptance. I apologize profusely for the short notice, but I am hoping to depart from this village early tomorrow morning. We will guarantee your safety on the journey."

And so, Rio headed toward the capital once more.



Several days after Rio departed from the village, he visited the royal castle of the Karasuki Kingdom. By accompanying Gouki and Kayoko, he was able pass through the entrance without being questioned, and was then led to a particular room. There, an older middle-aged couple were waiting: they were the king, Karasuki Homura, and the queen, Karasuki Shizuku.

"O-Ooh, you must be Rio... Indeed, I can see traces of Ayame," Homura said in a shaking voice as he staggered to his feet, eyes fixed on Rio's face. Meanwhile, Shizuku was staring at Rio's face with overwhelmed emotion.

His Majesty, King Homura, and Her Highness, Queen Shizuku... The queen really looks just like mom.



Rio stared back at the two of them in a daze. They left a much more friendly impression than he had been expecting, having been imagining what kind of people they were up until that moment.

“...It is an honor to meet you, Your Majesty, King Homura, and Your Highness, Queen Shizuku. My name is Rio. I am extremely delighted to be granted an audience with your countenance on this occasion,” Rio introduced himself courteously after they stared at each other for a few seconds. Then, Homura gave a strained laugh.

“I am simply meeting my adorable grandchild. There is no need for that manner of etiquette and speech, and no need to be so uptight.”

“That is correct. You are our grandson.”

The royal couple spoke with a hint of mellow reservation.

“With your pardon, then... I’ll do my best.” Rio nodded awkwardly.

“It looks like we’ll need to deepen our familial relations first. We both seem to be bewildered. Let us exchange words regarding that first, shall we?”

“Yes, there’s so much that I wish to tell you, and so much that I’d like to ask. Although our time is limited, let us chat to our hearts content.”

Homura’s lips curled up at the mouth as Shizuku smiled elegantly. “Now, shall we sit down first?”

“Yes, excuse me.” Rio took a seat.

“Oh, Rio. I’m so glad to meet you. You really are identical to Ayame,” Shizuku said in a clearly animated way. Her gaze was fixed on Rio’s face as she took in all his features and the aura that were similar to Ayame’s.

“I personally feel that you are identical to my mother...” Rio confessed shyly.

“Oh, really?” Shizuku tilted her head curiously.

“Yes. If my mother was here right now, I’d mistake you for her sister.”

“Oh? Oh my. Dear me, how embarrassing... Even though I’m already a grandma.” Shizuku’s cheeks reddened in embarrassment.

Though she was being humble, her appearance was truly youthful. As

Ayame's mother, she should have been upper-middle age, yet she could pass off as someone at the prime of their life.

After that, they fumbled their way through a conversation together, closing the distance between them. Shizuku's range of expressions was vibrant, and she easily burst into laughter at Rio's stories.

Then, after they had talked for several minutes...

"Shizuku... I feel like it's been a while since I've seen you laugh in such a carefree way," Homura said, seeing the elegant smile blooming on Shizuku's face.

"Oh my, don't say that. That would mean I've been smiling in a fake way this entire time," Shizuku said with a cute pout.

"Oh no, my dear. Forgive me — that was not my intention," Homura apologized in a hurry.

At that, Shizuku smiled happily. "You seem to be having more fun than usual too, King Homura," she said.

"That... is probably because Rio is here."

"Yes, indeed."

Homura and Shizuku shared a smile with each other, then nonchalantly exchanged a look with a small nod.

"Hey, Rio. Would you like to tell us about Ayame and Zen?" Shizuku suddenly asked.

They had been talking in order to deepen their relationship until now, but the intention of this question was clearly different. Homura and Shizuku wanted to know about the aftermath of what had happened to the two they chased out of their kingdom. It wasn't simply a question asked out of curiosity.

"...To begin with the conclusion, both of them have passed away already," Rio said in a slightly subdued tone.

"...We have been informed of that already. However..."

"We'd like to know more, like the reason why they died, or how they lived."

Shizuku hesitated to say her words, so Homura voiced her question out loud resolutely. Their eyes were locked onto Rio's with certainty.

"...My father passed away while I was too young to remember anything, so I'm afraid I only have memories of my time with my mother. If that is all right with you..."

"Is that so... Then, could you tell us about what about your life that you remember?"

"...I understand."

Rio took a deep breath and nodded slowly. Then, he began to speak about his father's death in the way that it had been conveyed to him by his mother, as well as his memories with Ayame. The details were mostly similar to what he had told Yuba before — that Zen was working as an adventurer who one day messed up on the job and died, leaving Rio and Ayame to live alone until Rio turned five years old.

"My mother was a kind person who was always smiling. That's why I thought it was natural for it just to be the two of us when I was a child. She had never once shown me any sadness over my father's death," Rio said with regard to Ayame's personality.

"We were, by no means, wealthy in the least. But while he was alive, my father had earned a lot of money for us, so we were able to get by without a need for my mother to work. Our neighbors would look at us with prejudice just for having different colored hair, but those days were filled with happiness. However, my life with my mother didn't last for very long. When I was five years old, my mother... She passed away." Unable to determine how far he should talk, Rio hesitated to continue.

"When you were five... How did you live from that point onward, then?" Shizuku asked fearfully.

Rio had braced himself in case they inquired after the reason of his mother's death, so he relaxed in relief. Apparently the fact he had lost both his parents by the age of five had a much stronger impact.

"...I became an orphan in the poorer part of town." Rio said casually, with a

hint of a bitter smile mixed in.

“Oh...” Shizuku looked like she would start crying at any moment. Homura had his eyes closed as he clenched his fists tightly.

“But I was only an orphan until the age of seven.” Rio said with a small shrug.

“Is that so... How did you live after the age of seven?” Homura asked.

“I saved an important person of the kingdom by chance, and was granted enrollment into an education institute managed by the kingdom as a reward.”

“Oh? An educational institute... We have such institutions in this kingdom too, but only court nobles and certain military families are permitted entry. Was it different in that kingdom?”

“No, there was no difference. Everyone around me was what you would call a court noble or royalty in this kingdom.”

“...Then you must have suffered greatly.” Homura immediately guessed that Rio had been subjected to much discrimination based on his social status.

“No, it is true that the hostility toward me was high, but there was someone there who treated me kindly, too. Thanks to them, I can proudly say my days there were fun,” Rio said with a gentle smile. It was all thanks to Celia.

But that wasn't enough to appease Homura and Shizuku's emotions, as they continued to avoid eye contact with him. Gouki and Kayoko, who had been listening silently from the side, also had expressions of pain on their faces.

“From there, I attended the academy until I was twelve years old, before departing for this land.”

“I had heard there were kingdoms far to the west, but... you did well making it here unharmed. Thanks to that, we were able to meet you.” Homura lowered his head deeply in an excessive show of gratitude toward Rio. Knowing that the king wasn't in a position where he should be easily lowering his head to others, Homura's gratitude resounded greatly within Rio.

“When I was young, my mother would tell me a lot about you. And she promised me that she would someday take me to this land. She wasn't able to fulfill that promise, but I have always wanted to travel here. At the very least, I

wanted to make a grave for them in their home town.”

“Ayame promised such a thing to you...” Homura bit down on his lip. He was filled with a mixture of happiness, regret, and shame.

The sound of Shizuku’s sobbing cries echoed through the room as Homura closed his eyes and fell silent. The silence continued for a while.

Then, after some time, Homura took a deep breath and inquired after the one thing that Rio wanted to be asked the least. “...Rio. Would you tell us how Ayame died?”

“...I must warn you, it may be difficult to hear. Do you still wish to know anyway?” Rio asked, questioning the amount of resolution behind Homura and the others. The story would most certainly be sickening to hear.

“We must know what happened... What happened in her last moments. And, if need be...”

We will blame ourselves — Homura’s face darkened with that implication.

“I’m sorry... I know it must be cruel to ask you to speak the truth, but we simply cannot bear remaining in the dark,” Shizuku agreed, not lifting her head.

The two of them spoke in a calm tone filled with their strong determination and will.

“Is that so...” Rio closed his eyes as though waffling over something, before he took a deep breath.

“My mother... was killed. Right before my eyes,” he said bluntly.

“...” While they expected it to some extent, Homura and the others were still visibly shocked.

“The person who killed my mother was a man named Lucius.”

Rio paid them no mind as he started to recall what had happened at the time. That was what they had wished for, after all.

For the five years after Zen’s death, Ayame rented a modest house in the capital of the kingdom of Beltrum and had raised Rio there. Fortunately, there was enough money saved to allow her to raise Rio alone as long as they didn’t

spend extravagantly. However, the burden on her was greater than expected, and she couldn't even afford to take her eyes away from Rio for just a moment to do a little shopping. During times like that, an adventurer named Lucius would help out Ayame. Ayame was acquaintances with Lucius back from when Zen was still alive.

Back then, Ayame had retired from adventuring when she became pregnant with Rio. Zen had continued in the adventuring industry alone for a while, but ever since one day in particular, he had started to complete missions together with Lucius.

Zen had the skills, but he was still a foreigner in a strange land. Lucius had called out to him while he was still getting used to the kingdom, and looked after him in various ways. Because of that, Zen brought Lucius home and introduced him to Ayame. That was how Ayame first came into contact with him.

Then, when Zen died shortly after Rio was born, Lucius supported Ayame in myriad ways as she devoted herself to raising her child. For instance, he went shopping on Ayame's behalf, visited with gifts in tow, or played with the young Rio.

At the time, neither Ayame nor Rio doubted that Lucius was a friendly and kind person; since he was an adventurer, his eyes were sharp, and there was some form of intensity behind him. However, his facial features were refined, and his personality was considerate and sociable, like a gentleman's.

It had all been an act.

One day, while Ayame had gone out on an errand in the neighborhood, she told Rio: "I'll be back soon, so don't leave the house if someone you don't know comes." Then, she had left her five-year-old son at home alone.

Immediately after Ayame left, Lucius visited the house. Rio had followed Ayame's words at first and pretended like no one was home.

"Rio — you're there, aren't you? It's me, Lucius. I met Ayame out there and she told me to come look after you. Could you open the door for me?" a voice said from the other side of the door. Once he realized it was Lucius, Rio immediately opened the door. Rio knew Lucius very well, so he trusted him

fully.

However, Lucius had done a complete 180 into a cruel and cold-hearted person.

“Gah...” Lucius walked into the house and kicked Rio in the abdomen.

The sudden impact to his stomach sent Rio’s small body flying; he had seen a glimpse of Lucius’ foot making contact with his stomach, but he couldn’t understand why Lucius would do such a thing.

“Wh...y...?” Rio rolled on the floor, wheezing.

“Hahaha. Listen up, Rio. In this world, sometimes there are wolves in sheep’s clothing. They love to betray people’s trust and spread malice. Demons like me love that more than anything. They’d even pretend to be good people to do it. That’s why you shouldn’t trust people so easily, you know?”

Lucius grabbed Rio’s head and peered at his face. “Now you’ve grown one wiser,” he added, and curled his lips in a joyful grin. A glint of madness could be seen in his eyes.

“Do you know what a demon’s favorite thing is, Rio?”

“...” Rio watched with fearful eyes, his head still clutched in Lucius’ grip.

“Demons... When they see things people find precious or beautiful, they want to break them and ruin them to the point of no return. The face of a human betrayed by someone they greatly trusted is especially delicious.” Lucius chatted away talkatively, but Rio couldn’t understand his words at all.

“But... You know, at your young age, you wouldn’t get what I’m saying anyway, would you? That’s why it isn’t as rewarding destroying brats like you, and I don’t really like it,” he said with a sigh.

“I can really spice things up with you, though. With Ayame — who treasures you more than anything — as the main dish.”

Again, Rio was unable to understand anything that Lucius was saying. All he knew was that he was afraid of the man. But it wasn’t just fear — faint buds of hatred were also trying to bloom within his chest. It caused Rio to glare at Lucius with an indescribable feeling.

“...Oh? So you can make a good expression, too.” Lucius’ eyes widened with interest as he chuckled with a grin. He kicked Rio’s prone form and rolled him face-up, before stepping on his stomach and pressing him into the floor.

“Guh...” A cry of pain left Rio’s mouth.

“Well, having you wailing and crying would just be a killjoy. Let’s silence you before Ayame gets home, shall we? Don’t worry, it won’t hurt. It’s just a little drug... One that paralyzes your body and makes your mind gradually grow hazy. If Ayame gets home early, you may even be awake to see her for the last act.”

Lucius grabbed Rio by the hair and lifted his face, then reached into his pocket and took out a small metal bottle that he thrust into Rio’s mouth. Unable to spit it out, Rio swallowed the unknown substance. Immediately after that, a burning heat seared within his stomach, and gnawed away at his body bit by bit. His breathing grew shallow, and he couldn’t find strength in his limbs.

That was when the door opened. It swung open a little faster than usual, most likely because of how it was unlocked.

It was Ayame.

“Welcome home, Ayame! You’re early,” Lucius called out to her casually, with Rio still underfoot. Rio was panting in pain, face flushed with a fever.

“W-What are you doing, Lucius?!” Ayame froze where she stood in a daze, managing to speak in a high-pitched voice once she processed the situation.

“Haha. Isn’t it obvious...?” Lucius smiled in delight as he spoke to Ayame.

At this point, Rio’s consciousness had already faded, and he couldn’t make out the words they exchanged. A fog had fallen over his vision, but he still had some vague sense of awareness left. He remained in that state for so long, it felt like it would never end. The only thing that was carved vividly into his memory was the hazy sight of Lucius abusing Ayame.

At the very end, however, Rio had the vague feeling Ayame had hugged him. While he couldn’t be certain whether it was a dream or reality, Ayame had smiled at him gently with tears in her eyes.

It had most likely been real. That’s what he wanted to believe.

But, behind Ayame, Lucius was standing with his sword in hand. He made eye contact with Rio and curled his lips in a repulsive grin.

That was the last thing Rio remembered. When he awakened, Rio had been thrown into a back alleyway of the capital. His clothes were stained with someone's blood splatter, but Rio refused to accept reality and wandered around the capital in a daze, searching for his house. He had no idea how long he walked for, but Rio eventually found the plain old house they had been renting. However, the door to the house had been locked shut.

Rio found a neighbor he recognized somewhat and asked them for his mother's whereabouts, the neighbor was disgusted by him, and told him that she was dead. The house was a vacant house, now.

After that, Rio lived on the streets of the slums for the two years until he enrolled into the Royal Academy, all while carrying a hatred toward Lucius in his chest the entire time.

"...And that's what happened," Rio declared with a frown.

With that, he had revealed his entire dark past — one that he had never told anyone else before. Everyone in the room — Homura, Shizuku, Gouki, and Kayoko — was trembling. The budding emotions in their chests may have been anger, or sorrow, or perhaps something else. Rio stared back at Homura and the others with a little bit of regret, wondering if he really should have told them the truth.

"Rio, you must bear so much resentment toward us, for causing Ayame to suffer such a thing..." Homura murmured softly in a voice that suppressed his emotions.

"I do resent you—" Rio said bluntly, without a hint of hesitation.

"..." Homura and the others shook greatly. They had been prepared to be cursed, but Rio's frank words stabbed them deep in their hearts.

"—is what someone else might say if they had been in the same situation as me. However, I do not feel any particular resentment toward you," Rio added with a bitter smile.

Homura and the others stared at Rio with dumbfounded expressions.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to surprise you like that. But... everyone is greatly misunderstanding something, here. Please don’t feel any misplaced guilt, or think of yourselves as the wrong-doers.”

“...Why do you say that?” Homura asked in a hoarse voice.

“I was raised lovingly by my mother, and watched her from the closest perspective possible. That’s why I know: my mother did not hate you. If anything, I believe she felt grateful for being able to marry my father. That’s why it wouldn’t be right for me to hate you,” Rio said, his features breaking down at the memories he recalled of his mother.

“Is that, so...” Homura and the others trembled once more, hanging their heads low. They couldn’t bear the feelings of remorse and embarrassment.

Misplaced guilt, thinking of themselves as the wrong-doers... Rio’s words were right on the mark. What Rio had said just now stabbed them deeper in the heart than when he had said he resented them. They realized exactly how helpless they were.

“But, Rio. Allow me to ask one thing: what do you think of this Lucius, the man who killed Ayame? Can you forgive him?”

“No. I can’t forgive him, most likely, ever. Just recently, I realized there were things in this world that are absolutely unforgivable.” Rio shook his head as he suppressed his emotions.

“Then, do you seek revenge?”

“I’m not considering living only for the sake of revenge, since I don’t know where he is, or if he’s even alive. However, if I do meet that man someday, then with these hands I will...”

“...I see. I am a king, after all; I have seen countless repulsive humans up until this point. That is why I can understand the emotions that you carry, and will not deny them. But, if you are to pursue the road to vengeance, there is one thing I must tell you first,” Homura said, narrowing his eyes as though to see through Rio’s determination.

“What is it?” Rio took on Homura’s gaze head-on.

“Vengeance is not justice. The dead may not wish for revenge, and vengeance will only give birth to new vengeance. Consequently, the road to vengeance only leads to hell. Even if you want to turn back, you won’t be able to. You understand that, right?”

“Yes, I am aware.”

“You can still turn back right now. Will you still kill him, knowing that?”

“...Yes, that is what I have decided. I will no longer avert my eyes from reality. From people’s malice, from my own weaknesses. That is why I am willing to dirty these hands if necessary.” Rio asserted his own will plainly, with a determined expression.

Homura looked into Rio’s eyes carefully; his caramel-colored eyes showed no signs of delusion or madness. They were the eyes of someone who knew that there was no such thing as absolute morals in this world, yet had chosen to stick by their own morals anyway. That was why he wasn’t about to resort to any means possible for his vengeance, and he wouldn’t incur anyone else’s enmity for his own selfish reason.

Homura sighed with resignation.

“...Is that so. In that case, I will not stop you from seeking vengeance.”

If Rio had lost sight of his way, Homura would have imparted words, as his grandfather, to lead him back to a less painful road. However, there was no point in doing that to Rio as he was right now. From his experience as a king that had lived a long life, Homura could understand that human emotions weren’t so fragile that they could be washed away with a few idealistic words.

“...However, as your grandfather, I wish to know whether you have the strength to carry out that will of yours. Would you consider facing off with Gouki?”

“...You wish for me to spar with Lord Gouki?” Rio’s eyes widened, and he tilted his head at Homura’s sudden proposal.

“Forgive me — I have bewildered you with my sudden insolence. It is simply the meddlesome actions of the elderly...”

“No, I just haven’t completely grasped the point of such an action...”

“It’s about Lucius. From what you told us just now, he sounds quite skilled. With a personality as repulsive as his, I wouldn’t doubt that Zen’s death could also be attributed to him. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“...Yes. I have considered it as a possibility.”

“That being said, I knew Zen very well. At the very least, he wasn’t the type you could easily gain the upper hand on in a fight. Isn’t that right, Gouki?” Homura said, looking at him.

Gouki nodded silently, before offering his own opinion on the matter. “Yes, most sneak attacks wouldn’t be able to phase a man like him. If that foul man truly took out Zen with his own hands, then reluctant as I am to admit it, I believe he must be quite powerful.”

“That’s how it is. You must be at least Zen’s strength or greater if you ever wish to confront Lucius. And, even if he didn’t kill Zen, strength is invaluable for a journey like yours, is it not?” Homura asked.

“Yes,” Rio said, nodding.

“In that regard, Gouki was once evenly matched with Zen, and now has many years of military experience under his belt. He is a veteran warrior unmatched not only in this kingdom, but the neighboring kingdoms as well. There is no one in this kingdom stronger than this man that could test your true abilities. How about it — would you like to spar with him?”

In other words, Homura wanted to train Rio.

On the battlefield, he held the nickname of the “Fierce God Gouki” — the number of strong opponents he had slayed was immeasurable. Under Gouki, his grandchild would be able to gain valuable experience, Homura thought. Behind his words was a glimpse into the utmost faith he had in Gouki.

“I wouldn’t dare to dream of such a thing. If he would be so kind as to teach me, then I gladly accept.” Rio nodded with a bold smile.

“Is that so? Then may I leave Rio to you, Gouki?” Homura asked of him.

“Of course. Accepting this duty would be my honor.” Gouki nodded with

plenty of emotion behind the action.

“Then, I shall leave it to you. ...Now, Rio. Forgive me, but I have come here today using the time between my official duties. We will have to wrap things up for now. Please, make yourself at home under the care of Gouki’s residence. Don’t forget to spar with him.”

Considering Ayame’s past, Rio’s identity wasn’t to be revealed under any circumstances, so no one was to know of this secret meeting. If the meeting had continued for too long, the unused time in their schedules might be questioned by the retainers, so they had reached their time limit.

Thus, the meeting moved to wrap itself up for the day.

“Rio, could you come here for a moment?” Shizuku stood up and suddenly called out to him. “...Yes, of course.” Rio nodded, hesitantly approaching Shizuku. She gently hugged him.

“You grew up so wonderfully, all by yourself. Well done making it this far. Thank you so much.” Burying her face in Rio’s larger body, Shizuku was moved to tears.

Rio had stiffened faintly at suddenly being hugged out of the blue, but he soon melted under Shizuku’s warmth. It somehow reminded him of Ayame.

“No... I’m the one who is happy to be able to meet the two of you.” Rio timidly hugged Shizuku back.

“Yes...” With a fleeting smile, Shizuku looked up at Rio’s face from up close.

The expression Rio could see on Shizuku’s face from a distance wasn’t one of royalty, but a loving grandmother instead, though her outward appearance was slightly young for a grandmother. Homura gazed at the two of them with an expression filled with familial love.

“Now, let us go, Shizuku.”

“All right...” At Homura’s prompt, Shizuku reluctantly left the room.

“If you’d please, Sir Rio — Allow me to lead the way.” Once the king and queen had exited, Gouki spoke up quietly.

“Yes, please do.”



After the meeting, Rio left the royal castle and moved to the Saga estate.

The Saga family residence was located in a military town close to the heart of the capital, where the streets were quiet and a serene atmosphere hung in the air. Every residence in the area was enclosed within walls, but there wasn't much greenery for shelter, so the sturdy but wonderful mansions were neatly lined.

"It's this way."

As for the Saga residence, even amongst the other military town buildings, the mansion was particularly splendid. The materials used were wood and mortar, with some sections painted a crimson red. Rio passed through the gate of the estate as he admired its appearance. When the two guiding him entered the garden, the voice of a young girl echoed.

"Father! Mother! Welcome home!"

A cute little girl around ten years of age appeared. She wore a martial arts uniform and hakama, with a single wooden sword clutched in her hand. Her eyes were like beautiful gemstones, her facial features were defined, and her white skin was smooth like porcelain. Each feature was of the finest quality, making her the picture of innocence. Furthermore, her jet-black, silk-like hair reached down her back, rubbing against her clothes to play a beautiful tune.

...Hm?

Rio froze midstep when he saw the girl. He felt like he had seen the girl somewhere before... And very recently, at that.

A woman appeared behind the girl.

"My Lord, My Lady... Welcome home. Is that person to be a gues—" The woman gave a respectful greeting when she saw Rio's face and stiffened on the spot.

When Rio saw the woman's face, his sense of *deja vu* suddenly made sense. The two that had appeared were the people he had encountered walking through the capital just the other day: the girl who had almost been kidnapped,

and her bodyguard. He was taken aback by the completely unexpected twist of fate to see them here.

“How disrespectful, Aoi!” Gouki scolded the woman who had froze at the sight of Rio.

“P-Please forgive me!” Aoi paled and quickly bowed her head.

“...My Lord, there must be some kind of reason for this. Aoi, speak your mind.” Kayoko sought an explanation from her, quickly picking up on the reactions that Rio and Aoi had. She suspected that they had possibly been previously acquainted.

“U-Umm, that person there is the one who saved Lady Komomo,” Aoi disclosed the reason nervously.

“Saved me?” Komomo, the aforementioned girl, tilted her head curiously. That being said, it was understandable that she couldn’t recall anything, since she had been unconscious for the duration of the kidnapping incident.

“The other day, I ran into that girl over there being attacked by some ruffians...” Rio confessed somewhat guiltily.

“O-Ooh?! Is that so! What a tremendous coincidence!” Gouki’s eyes widened when he understood.

“At the time, I chose to make an exit before things became too troublesome, so it’s only natural for her to be surprised. Please, don’t scold her,” Rio said to help out Aoi.

“H-Hmm. If that’s how it is, then... we are thankful beyond measure, and are forever in your debt. Aoi, offer your gratitude, too.” Gouki glared at Aoi, who lowered her head at Rio.

“I-I’m so very sorry for the rudeness I showed earlier! I’d like to offer my utmost gratitude for your generous consideration. Thank you very much!” Aoi expressed her apologies and gratitude with a near-excessive amount of courtesy. Judging by the way Gouki interacted with Rio, she had guessed he was a fairly high-ranking person that was to be respected.

“N-No, it’s fine... I didn’t do anything special, after all.” Rio shook his head

with a strained smile.

For some reason, he always felt extremely uncomfortable when people treated him with an excessive amount of respect. He slumped his shoulders a little, resigning himself to being worn out by this type of treatment during his stay.

“Umm... If I may?” Komomo approached Rio timidly.

“Hm? What is it?”

“It’s nice to meet you. My name is Saga Komomo — thank you very much for saving me from those ruffians the other day,” Komomo said politely, bowing her head at Rio.

“Thank you for the courtesy. My name is Rio. Were you hurt at all from that?” Rio replied with a faint smile.

“No. Thanks to you, I’m the picture perfect of health!” Komomo laughed innocently with a fist pump.

“That’s great to hear.”

“Lord... Rio, thank you very much for saving my daughter. I would like to thank you from the bottom of my heart as well.”

The brief pause after the “Lord” title was probably due to the resistance Gouki had within himself. They had decided on the way here that Rio would be treated as a regular guest during his stay in the mansion, but putting that into practice was easier said than done. Gouki and Kayoko’s attitude toward Rio thus far had been more like that of a most valued guest, rather than a regular guest.

“It was nothing. You have a very cute daughter.”

“I am honored by the compliment. ...If I may ask, Lord Rio. What would you like to do about the sparring match? Preparations can be made right away, if you so wish.” Gouki happily thanked Rio, before he moved to gauge Rio’s interest in the match.

“That’s right. Then... May I ask you to make the preparations now?” Rio nodded with a huff of laughter. He was also quite eager for the fight.

While he had had no lack of sparring partners during his time in the spirit folk

village, he had mostly trained by himself since coming to the Yagumo region, so he was quite hungry for a mock battle with someone that was actually powerful.

“Father, will you be having a contest?!” Komomo’s expression brightened dramatically at the mention of a sparring match.

“Indeed, a contest it is. Is Hayate in the training grounds?”

“Yes! I was training there myself just a few moments ago.”

“I see. Then, you may come along and observe too. There will certainly be something to gain today. Now, Lord Rio — please follow me. This is the way to the training grounds.”

Thus, Rio, Gouki, Kayoko, Komomo, and Aoi all made their way to the training grounds.

The party arrived at the grounds to the sight of Hayate silently swinging his wooden sword. The training grounds were outdoors, boasting a rather wide area of land. At the corner of the area was a dojo-like building.

Hayate spotted Gouki and Kayoko and beamed brightly. “Ooh. Father, mother, welcome ho— Wait, Lord Rio?!” When he noticed Rio behind them, he let out a much more frantic voice.

“Good day, Lord Hayate. I’d say long time no see, but it hasn’t been that long.” Rio greeted him in lieu of their reunion, smiling wryly at his reaction.

“I-Indeed. But why are you here, Lord Rio?”

“Lord Rio will be staying at our house as a guest. We will now have a sparring match together, so you should observe, too. Prepare the wooden swords.” Gouki dismissed Hayate’s bewilderment with a detached explanation.

“Y-Yes, sir!” Hayate agreed in a panic and went to fetch the wooden swords for use in a mock battle. After that, the rest of the preparations were completed in the blink of an eye, and Rio and Gouki each took a wooden sword in hand as they faced each other at the center of the training grounds.

Kayoko, who would act as the referee, approached the two of them.

“In our kingdom, it is custom before a sparring match for warriors to

determine the level of danger, from that of a real combat situation, to something less so. What kind of agreement would you like to spar under?" she asked.

"Lord Gouki, what would you like to do?" Rio inquired.

"I shall leave it to you, Lord Rio." Gouki yielded the decision to Rio.

"In that case, I would like a sparring match that conforms to real combat." Rio requested without hesitation.

In response, Gouki lips curled into a smile he couldn't hold back. Kayoko's expression also twitched with a faint smile.

Meanwhile, Hayate had a strangely troubled look on his face, while Komomo was gazing at Rio with admiration in her eyes. In Aoi's case, she was watching Rio with anxiety and concern.

They each had a visibly different expression.

"...I understand. Then to put it bluntly, anything short of killing is allowed. We can heal a decent amount of injuries with spirit arts, so please don't hold yourself back. Is that all right?" Kayoko looked at Rio to check.

"I have no objections," Rio assented with no sign of fear.

"Then, both parties — distance yourselves and take your stances."

At Kayoko's orders, Rio and Gouki walked an appropriate distance away, opposite each other. They familiarized themselves with the grip of the wooden swords and assumed their stances.

"Begin!"

Kayoko signaled the start of the sparring match.

Immediately after, Rio moved forward as though he had teleported through space, closing the distance between him and Gouki in an instant and swinging his sword.

"?!"

Gouki was astonished by how Rio suddenly appeared before his eyes, but jumped forward without hesitation. He figured that if he tried to carelessly

retreat, it would only make him fall more behind at the start of their sparring match. In an all or nothing move, he lowered his defensive stance and ran forward, evading Rio's sword as he tried to slip into range of his opponent's chest.

Rio dropped to his knees at once and aimed a knee strike at Gouki's stooped stance. However, once he realized the pommel of Gouki's sword was being aimed at his knees, Rio immediately retreated.

Both parties distanced themselves and regrouped, adjusting their stances as they examined each other.

Hmm... I was practically unable to predict his movements. Perhaps it is due to the fact that he had to grow up so quickly, but he has amazing skill for such a young age. A cold sweat ran down Gouki's spine as his mouth curved in a daring smile.

Normally, for a human to move their body, they needed to put strength into their physique and allow for the accumulation of excess movements. However, when it came to experienced martial artists, they had the eyes to see through excess like that and take the upper hand. They also had the acquired technique to relax their own actions so as to not be seen through by their opponent.

Through the short exchange just now, Gouki had ascertained that Rio was an experienced fighter.

At that speed, I mustn't let the distance between us widen tactlessly. Maintaining distance will only lead to me falling behind... And the moment I lose focus is the moment I will be hunted down...

With that in mind, Gouki approached Rio as close as he could get. He figured that at this short distance, Rio wouldn't be able to use his superhuman speed out of avoidance of a collision... and he wasn't wrong.

In the spirit folk village, Rio had learned during his studies of spirit arts to forcefully accelerate his body using wind spirit arts with no excess movements, as well as the ability to combine that with techniques to relax his movements and catch his opponent off guard. However, the drawback of this movement technique of his was that the acceleration was too fast and didn't allow for maneuverability, meaning its use was limited when his opponent got too close.

Because of that, he could only show his true power when fighting in wide fields where he could move freely.

He's closing the distance between us... I suppose that's to be expected of one so experienced in battle. He'd probably crush me the moment I try to fall back and widen the distance again. If that's the case...

Rio admired how Gouki immediately counteracted his speed — as expected of the one they call the Fierce God, he thought. But in that next moment, he relaxed his strength and stepped into Gouki's space. Gouki immediately reacted by swinging his sword, but Rio easily stopped the blow. Their respective wooden swords came into contact with ferocity, causing a shrill noise to echo throughout the training grounds.

The two were suddenly right in each other's space, exchanging blows too fast for the eye to follow. They were both attacking while concealing any signs of attack, and both seeing through the other. After the intense exchange of offensive and defensive moves continued for several moments, the two sword tips struck the ground as though crossing over.

"How fearsome. To think you'd have such skills at such a young age... You have truly surpassed both Zen and I from back then. And, you have yet to reach your golden age in terms of both body and experience too..." Gouki stopped moving and grinned.

"The only thing I never stopped doing was training."

"I'm beat..." Gouki said as he swung his wooden sword at Rio once more. However, Rio turned his body and cut into Gouki's side, evading his slash as he let out his own attack. Gouki pulled his thrust-out sword in immediately, stopping Rio's blow. Their swords collided fiercely once again as the two of them pushed back at each other in their close-fought match.

"...It sure doesn't look that way."

"Fights that make my heart dance like this don't happen too often. Having the opponent be Lord Rio on top of that makes it all the more invigorating."

As he spoke, Gouki languidly withdrew his body and immediately stepped forward with force, releasing three consecutive strikes faster than one could

visibly detect.

And yet, Rio handled those strikes deftly.

Gouki had swung his sword for years — no, decades. His thrusts just now were packed with the fruits of his labor and abilities, which was why Rio thought that Gouki was unmistakably the strongest of all those he had fought up until now. As a human, his physical abilities might have been inferior to werebeasts and dwarves even when enhanced by spirit arts, but his battle techniques far surpassed them.

“Zen was a man with an innate talent for the arts of battle, but I see that talent has been inherited by you quite thoroughly. No, you may even have more than he did,” Gouki said, launching a two-thrust strike that was even sharper than the earlier three consecutive strikes.

Rio aimed for the timing of when the second thrust was fully extended to repel Gouki’s sword, making Gouki lose his balance a bit. Rio used that chance to attack, aiming a roundhouse kick to his torso. Gouki tried to immediately guard himself with his left arm, but his entire body was sent flying.

Kuh, using both swordcraft and martial arts together... Splendid. The damage Gouki received was by no means light, but his expression was cheerful.

Hayate and Aoi watched the sight of Gouki being blown away in dumbfounded silence. Even the calm Kayoko widened her eyes by a fraction.

Komomo was the only one with sparkling eyes; filled with reverence and adoration, as to not miss a single moment of such a high-order battle unfolding before her.

Gouki used the momentum of being kicked to unthinkingly widen his distance between himself and Rio. However, Rio moved like the wind, and closed in on Gouki in an instant.

With no other choice, Gouki responded to Rio’s challenge. He barely managed to deal with Rio’s consecutive attacks, clearly having gone on defense.

“I can’t believe it... Father...” Hayate was aghast with the thought of Gouki losing.

He couldn't believe that Gouki, who had been undefeated until now, was seemingly on the losing side. And to a boy younger than himself, no less. Nevertheless, that was what was unfolding before his eyes. Gouki had yet to make a single telling blow against Rio, while Rio had already made several against Gouki.

No... If they had been using real swords instead, Gouki would have already been rendered incapacitated.

Against Gouki's fighting style, which was focused on his sword, Rio used an ever-changing mix of swordcraft and martial arts as his. On top of making his opponent aware of their sword-focused style, he launched nasty, agonizing attacks without warning.

Gouki was only blocking the fatal blows with his skill and experience, letting a few good attacks land in between. Gouki's legs were trembling faintly; it was evidence of the accumulated damage. However, he showed no sign of faltering. He endured it through sheer will and fighting spirit, unwilling to let such a wonderful match end so easily.

"Hahaha! How thrilling it is indeed!" Gouki yelled with a brazen smile. Then, he purposefully widened the distance with Rio, whose speed surpassed his own, and smoothly braced his sword without hesitation.

Essence is converging around his sword...

Rio immediately noticed that Gouki was trying to use some kind of skill. He could charge forward and close the distance, but that would be a risky move when he didn't know what skill his opponent was using.

"F-Father, don't tell me you're using that...?! " Hayate yelled from the side of the training grounds. He seemed to have in mind what skill Gouki was about to unleash, as well as the power behind the skill, too.

Rio showed no sign of fear, however. He raised his own essence as though to face the skill Gouki was about to release head on, and watched carefully.

"Hidden Skill, First Blade, *Air Slash!*"

Gouki swung his sword in a straight line, and a giant horizontal slash in the air came flying toward Rio. It was a wind blade that had been infused with essence

through spirit arts.

Unlike magic, spirit arts didn't require a spell name to be chanted, so it wasn't actually necessary to give each and every skill a name. However, as spirit arts were miraculous techniques that put one's own will and imagination into the essence or ode to communicate with mana and bring about different phenomena, the rationality of skill names leading to enhanced will and imagination was real. It was all the more effective when it came to a swordsman as experienced as Gouki, who had found both his ideal stance and the strong spirit to swing his sword in a single decisive stroke through his daily training.

In actuality, the blade of wind he had unleashed was extremely powerful. Against regular humans, it would have been able to tear through and mow down several people at once.

Rio immediately detected the power behind the attack and gave up receiving it with his wooden sword. However, he made no move to evade it, deciding to accept the challenge directly. He manipulated the essence he had drawn from his body and gathered it in his right hand before swinging it like a scythe. Immediately after, a tsunami-like wall of water appeared before Rio's eyes, crashing into the wind blade.

An explosive sound echoed throughout the training grounds as wind and water scattered about the surroundings.



“Gah, what in the world...?!”

With his vision impaired by the spray, Gouki narrowed his eyes a bit. Rio used that opening to move around Gouki and cut into his side, thrusting his wooden sword right before his throat.

“That’s enough! The victor of this match is Lord Rio,” Kayoko, the referee, said without a moment’s delay.

“...I’ve lost.” Gouki let the strength drain from his body as he accepted his defeat.

“Thank you very much.” Rio withdrew his sword with a bow.

“My goodness. Creating such a large volume of water in an instant in an environment that doesn’t have moisture at all... I am in awe indeed. It seems Lord Rio has exceptional talent for spirit arts too.” Gouki praised Rio without restraint.

“F-Father! Wasn’t that last attack too much?!” Hayate’s voice called out. He had been standing alongside Aoi in shock until now, but his thoughts had finally recovered enough to object to that last slash attack.

“Lord Rio would have been able to handle it. I used that hidden skill only because I believed in him. He ended up fine, did he not?” Gouki shook his head with a wry smile, but Hayate refused to accept that.

“You are only speaking in hindsight! If that had made direct contact, he would have died!”

“Hayate. That is crude of you, you realize? There are some things that can only be understood by facing him like that. Personally, I knew that the attack would not reach him.”

“I-It is true that Lord Rio boasts an abnormal strength...”

“Lord Gouki only launched that skill because he believed I could deal with it.” Rio spoke up in support of Gouki with a strained smile.

“B-But, Lord Rio...”

“Perhaps it’d be a different matter if he had unleashed it to take me by

surprise mid-battle, but it was launched from straight on as a direct challenge to me. Also, I was the one who desired a match on par with actual combat. I was more than prepared for the risks.”

“That’s...” There weren’t many humans that could handle that attack, even if they knew it was coming. It wouldn’t be strange for most people to cower in fear simply from receiving Gouki’s vigor from straight on. And to see through that slashing attack and select a means of escape on top of that... Hayate definitely wouldn’t want to try it.

But in reality, Rio didn’t seem fazed about receiving the attack, so Hayate couldn’t object any further.

“That’s how it is, Hayate. Well, I thought he would avoid it if anything...” Gouki nodded with a triumphant expression, but he muttered the latter half of his words so faintly, they were barely audible. He glanced over at Kayoko and realized he was on the receiving end of a cold gaze.

Well, perhaps I may have gotten a little too fired up, he thought to himself with a cold sweat.

No matter how close to real combat their match may have been, it still wasn’t a good idea to launch a lethal attack against an opponent that was to be respected. Kayoko would definitely give him a light scolding about it later.

“...However, that doesn’t change the fact that I used a dangerous skill. Lord Rio, please accept my apologies.” Gouki bowed his head deeply at Rio regretfully.

“No, it’s fine. I was able to witness a magnificent skill.” Rio shook his head agreeably. It was a skill that had been launched only because they both sensed each other’s abilities and believed it wouldn’t hit. If anything, Rio found it to be an honor.

“U-Umm!” Komomo’s voice suddenly interrupted them. Everyone present affixed their gazes on her.

“Please spar with me too!” Her big eyes sparkled brightly as she challenged Rio to a match.

“Erm...” The sudden request caught Rio unaware, putting him at a loss for

words.

“Hahaha! Komomo tends to be drawn toward strong people. She must be unable to contain herself after seeing Lord Rio’s fight just now.” Gouki laughed heartily as he commented on Komomo’s personality.

“Yes! That fight just now was wonderful! I’ve never seen anyone defeat my father before!” Komomo agreed with an innocent smile.

“So, please!” She said, bowing her head enthusiastically.

“...Understood. That’s fine with me,” Rio agreed with a smile, impressed with Komomo’s earnest attitude.

“Lord Rio, thank you for agreeing to my daughter’s request. ...Komomo. Lord Rio is a person far above yourself. Consider it an honor to be able to practice with one of such higher skill.”

“Yes! Thank you very much!”

Komomo nodded energetically, thanking Rio.

“Then, first, allow me to clean up the water scattered everywhere.”

Rio pulled all of the nearby water formed in puddles on the ground toward him, swirling it into a spiral. Then, he lightly moved his hand, and drove it away into a corner of the training grounds. It was over in mere seconds, but everyone other than Rio watched the sight unfold with wide eyes.

“Producing such an amount of water instantly... Lord Rio must be quite an incredible practitioner of water spirit arts. I have never seen any water spirit arts this splendid in my many years of life,” Gouki said in surprise.

“I wouldn’t go that far...” Rio shook his head, glossing over the topic. Based on the reactions of Gouki and the others, he figured his actions were of a slightly advanced grade.

For the record, this level of spirit arts would have been a piece of cake for the high elf Orphia, and the other water spirit art users in the village would have been able to use it easily as well. But since the spirit folk had a much higher aptitude for spirit arts compared to humans, it was difficult to make a comparison to Rio.

“Now, Miss Komomo. Shall we?” Rio headed to the center of the training grounds promptly, before he could be hounded with any troublesome questions.

“Yes!” Komomo was rearing to face Rio, following after him in excitement.

With that, everyone else’s attention was drawn to the match about to start. Komomo stood in the center of the training grounds with a gallant expression. She took a deep breath to calm herself, before bracing her wooden sword in both her hands, aimed right at eye level. Rio’s eyes widened in awe at how Komomo’s aura changed completely.

The sparring match started soon after that. While there was a clear gap in their skills, the match developed in the form of Rio helping Komomo practice her skills.

“That was a bad move. You should have widened the distance between us and regained your footing first.” Rio allowed Komomo to attack him, but whenever parts of her movements were poor, he took advantage of it aggressively and struck her where it hurt.

There were multiple times where the match would have been decided under normal circumstances, but the sparring match continued until Komomo was satisfied with how much she had swung her sword. Thus, Komomo began to move while thinking about where she had gone wrong.

“Hah, hah...”

After they had exchanged enough blows, they sat on the ground and panted for breath. Komomo’s expression was extremely pleased; she had been able to gain experience she would never have been able to get normally when fighting her family, so she was filled with happiness from the bottom of her heart. The radiant sight of Rio made her feel as though she could reach higher and become stronger. Komomo could only look up at his face in fascination.



The next day after the match with Gouki, Rio returned to the royal castle of the Karasuki Kingdom once again to secretly meet with Homura and Shizuku.

“I’ve heard the news... So, you’ve bested Gouki, it seems. ‘Splendid’ is all I can

say.”

The first thing Homura said upon opening his mouth was high praise for Rio. He had heard of the result of the sparring match from Gouki before the secret meeting, but he had never imagined that Gouki, as someone famously known as the Fierce God, would lose. Homura had thought it was some kind of joke at first, but he knew that Gouki wasn't the type of person to make jokes like that.

It definitely took him a while to accept the truth, but Homura had managed to regain most of his composure in the time before the meeting.

Meanwhile, Shizuku praised Rio with a dazzling smile. “You're amazing, Rio. You even defeated Gouki!”

Unlike Homura, whose commendation was mixed with bewilderment, Shizuku was genuinely happy for Rio's victory.

“Thank you very much.” Rio bowed his head bashfully.

“I was thinking of having you train under Gouki for a while, but it seems my concern was uncalled for...” Homura said with a trace of sadness in his smile.

He *had* intended to make Rio train under Gouki, after all. That way, it would have been inevitable for Rio to live in the capital and increase the frequency of their secret meetings... or so he had quietly hoped. Although he knew they had to refrain from excessive contact with Rio because of the various circumstances preventing them from revealing Rio's identity, his desire to see Rio more was strong.

Then, whether he knew Homura's sentiments or not, Rio spoke.

“No, I was able to gain valuable experience. There aren't many opportunities to fight with someone like Lord Gouki. Thank you for your consideration.” Rio offered Homura words of honest gratitude.

“Is that so. Then, that is most important... But, Rio. Just sometimes is enough. Until you depart from this land, would you come to this castle again and talk with us from time to time?” Homura asked. Shizuku watched Rio in anticipation of his answer.

“That is... Of course. If that is all right with you.” On the receiving end of his

grandparents warm gazes, Rio nodded timidly.

“...I see. Thank you.” Homura said gratefully and bowed his head at Rio.

“Please, there is no need to lower your head.” Rio tried to stop him in a fluster.

“No... You are wasting your precious time going along with our selfish requests. We have caused nothing but trouble and hardship for you. When I think of it that way, it makes me feel most ashamed...”

“That’s not the case. If I didn’t want to meet the two of you, I would have rejected your proposal to come here from the beginning. I have come here of my own free will,” Rio said bluntly in response to Homura’s pained words.

Whether it was Yuba, Homura, or Shizuku, there was no doubt that they were all important people to Zen and Ayame. That was why Rio wanted to get along with them, too. He wanted to hear stories of his parents that he didn’t know.

“Rio...” Shizuku muttered Rio’s name with great emotion.

“Then, we must develop this relationship more...” Homura beamed.

After that, Rio and his grandparents chatted about many things. The conversation topics focused around what they had in common: namely, charming stories of Zen and Ayame. Episodes concerning them seemed to be the most suitable compromise between the two parties.

While the three of them continued their pleasant talk to their heart’s content, their time together was limited. Homura and Shizuku had duties to attend to on this day as well, and Rio had to return to the village tomorrow. Although they made a promise to meet again at a later date, all that had been decided was that Gouki would visit the village when the time was right, with no definitive date decided. Therefore, they didn’t know when they would meet again, so they had to say anything they wanted to say here and now.

“There isn’t much time left, but is there anything else you wanted to hear?” Homura asked Rio.

“...I have a cousin in the village I’m living in right now. Would I be permitted to reveal my heritage to that girl?”

Of course, the cousin he was referring to was Ruri. As Rio considered Ruri another precious member of his family, he didn't want to let her be the only one left out of the loop.

"Hmm. If she can strictly adhere to confidentiality, then it wouldn't be a problem. I shall trust your judgment in this." Homura faintly made a show of consideration before readily allowing it. That was how much he trusted Rio.

"Thank you very much," Rio said with a grin.

Chapter 7: To The Village

The day after his secret meeting with Homura and Shizuku, Rio departed from the capital alone. Gouki had adamantly proposed to send him off, but Rio had declined, saying he wanted to get back as soon as possible. In reality, what was several days' journey on foot only took Rio one flight with his spirit arts.

"Welcome back," the villagers said warmly as Rio returned to the village.

He responded to the villagers he met in kind. "I'm back," he greeted them.

"I'm home," Rio said as he entered the village chief's house.

"Welcome home, Rio." Yuba welcomed him cheerily from where she sat on a mat in the living room. "It seems like you managed to get some proper talks done."

"Yes," Rio nodded, smiling without realizing it. He was happy to see that Yuba's attitude hadn't changed.

"Shall I speak more formally when we're alone together?" Yuba asked in jest, to which Rio rejected with a bitter smile.

"Please don't."

Yuba cackled with laughter. "Like I said before, even if you might be royalty, you and I will always be grandmother and grandson. That's what I believe. As long as you think so, too, that will never change."

"Thank you very much. Actually, there was something I wanted to consult with you regarding family..." Rio brought up questioningly.

"What's this? You're being all stiff."

"It's about Ruri. I've received permission to reveal my heritage to her, but I wanted to get your permission too..."

"...As long as she is related to you by blood, she has a right to know," Yuba nodded with a huff of laughter.

“Thank you. Where might Ruri be now?”

“Having tea with the other village girls, I suppose. If she heard that you’ve returned, she’ll probably come running any moment now. She was worried when you suddenly left the village.”

“Is that so...” Rio smiled shyly.

That was when Ruri returned. “I’m home! Rio, you’re back! Geez, where did you go?!”

“I had some important matters to attend to. I’m sorry for making you worry.”

“Honestly. Granny wouldn’t even explain what happened when I asked her. You were suddenly taken away from the village by some strange people, so I was really worried.”

“There’s actually something I wanted to tell you about that...”

“Something to tell me?”

“Yes. But before I can tell you, you must agree to keep the details of this a secret.”

“Uhh, what’s this about?” Ruri tilted her head at Rio’s vague explanation.

“It’s about who I am. Yuba is already aware — that is why she let me live in this house. I would like you to know, too, but the secret has to be kept under strict confidentiality, so I wanted to check if you were okay with that first...” Rio chose his words carefully as he explained, peering at Ruri’s face.

“About who you are, huh? Yeah, I want to know. I promise, I won’t tell anyone what you tell me.” Ruri’s face was tinged with fear, but she nodded resolutely.

“Then, here goes.”

“Okay. Whenever you’re ready.” Ruri took a deep breath and nodded, waiting for Rio’s story to start. Rio exchanged glances with Yuba before opening his mouth somewhat nervously.

“First of all, you and I are cousins. My father was your father’s little brother.”

“...Huh. Is that so... You and I are cousins.”

While Ruri had stiffened slightly at the words, she accepted the truth offered

to her rather readily.

“You don’t seem surprised...?” Yuba asked with wide eyes.

“...No, I *am* surprised, but I figured it’d be something like this based on the atmosphere in the room. And, Rio’s already family anyway.”

“Thank you,” Rio thanked her shyly. “I also think of you like family, which is why I wanted to bring this topic up. I wanted to tell you.”

“Y-Yeah, same here. Thank you.” Ruri, embarrassed, also offered her thanks.

“And so, my father... the person who would be your uncle, his name is Zen. My mother’s name is Karasuki. Karasuki Ayame. A princess of this kingdom.”

After a few long seconds of silence, Ruri cocked her head. “...Excuse me?”

“My mother was a princess of this kingdom,” Rio repeated with a wry smile.

“Guess this one’s a little harder to believe,” Yuba said with a hearty laugh.

“Umm... That’s a joke, right?”

“It’s the truth. Rio’s father... Your uncle... Married the princess of this kingdom.”

“Really, Granny?”

“I’m telling you, it’s the truth. Why would we lie about this?” Yuba nodded with a strained smile at Ruri’s still-dazed question.

“But... It’s just... ...Huuuh? Really? But then... Oh, no. That would... like, you know... That would make Rio a prince, right?”

“Well... I guess it would. Though unauthorized, Rio would be royalty of this kingdom.”

“Ahaha... But like, that’s still impossible. There’s no way a villager could marry a princess, after all.”

“Silly. Rio’s father was promoted to the status of a warrior for his distinguished service in the war. That was how he came to know Princess Ayame. I’d tell you to ask the others in the village... but you obviously can’t, although the older folks in the village know that Zen became a warrior.”

“A warrior... Then it wouldn’t have been odd for him to become acquainted with the princess, I guess? But then that would make Rio truly... a prince of this kingdom... right?”

“Lineage-wise, yes. That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you,” Yuba said with a tired sigh.

Ruri looked between Yuba and Rio’s face numerous times before finally coming to terms with what she had been told. Ruri paled as she suddenly turned to Rio and prostrated herself before him in a flurry. “E-Erm, P-Prince Rio... I-I’m so very sorry! Please forgive me for overstepping my boundaries and acting so rudely to you until now!”

“Wait! Please don’t do that. Just act like how you have been until now!” Rio stopped Ruri in a panic.

“B-But... Prince Rio is royalty... right?” Ruri raised her head at Rio timidly.

“My mother may have been, but I’m not. Even if you were to argue with the reasoning that the child of royalty must also be royalty, my existence can’t be made public. So, please. Just interact with me as you have been.” Rio shook his head bluntly, then bowed his head at Ruri.

“I can just... call you Rio?”

“Yes, that’s fine. Just like before.”

“I-I understand...” Ruri somehow managed to agree, but she was clearly still nervous.

“Your speech hasn’t changed back yet, you know?” Rio pointed out teasingly.

“Ah, yes... Right.” Ruri had almost unintentionally responded in the same stiff speech, when she managed to stop her thoughts and nod once more with an uncomfortable smile.

“I know you must be troubled to suddenly hear that I’m your cousin, but let’s please continue to get along.”

“...Yeah. I see... That’s right, Rio and I are cousins now,” Ruri muttered in a daze, as though reconfirming the truth. The impact of Rio’s mother being a princess was so powerful that she had completely forgotten the fact Rio was

her own cousin.

“That’s right. I’m your cousin,” Rio said.

“So I still had blood relatives other than Granny. Ah, that means I’m an older sister to you by a year, right?”

“That would be correct. Would you like me to refer to you as my older sister?” Rio asked with a playful laugh.

“N-No, that’s fine! I’m sorry! Wow, that’s embarrassing! No way!” Ruri yelled with a bright red face.

“Then I’ll continue to call you Ruri like I have been,” Rio said, the corners of his lips turning up into a happy smile. Ruri’s expression wasn’t quite as accepting, though. “Mm. But we’re cousins, so... I think I’d prefer it if you spoke to me a bit more casually. Like a friendlier style of speech, no?” she asked, peering at Rio’s face.

“Umm. I’ve said this once before, but this speech is practically a habit of mine now. It’s just... once I’ve started using this speech, it’s difficult to switch without a significant reason to,” Rio explained with a troubled smile. Even if the other person was a child, as long as they weren’t arrogant, Rio was uncomfortable speaking too casually with someone he was meeting for the first time. Of course, once he had gotten closer, he was willing to speak without reservation. But, unless there was some sort of cue to do otherwise, he would keep using his stiff speech out of embarrassment.

“Hmph. So you’re saying that being my cousin isn’t a significant enough reason?” Ruri glared at Rio in a slightly sulking manner.

With that, Rio finally seemed to get the idea. “...Well, I guess, that would be correct. I’m sorry... Yep, you’re right. How about this?” he said shyly, averting his eyes out of embarrassment.

“Yup!” Ruri’s expression brightened cheerfully. Perhaps some of Rio’s somewhat uneasy awkwardness had gotten through to her, as she was unbearably happy, now.

After that, Rio told Ruri other necessary information — mostly regarding the reason why Zen and Ayame left the village and the circumstances behind it —

and an explanation as to why Ruri needed to stay silent about Rio's heritage to the other villagers. Ruri seemed to have some thoughts about Rio's past, but she vowed to keep her silence.

Then, after Rio finished explaining his heritage to Ruri, he adjusted his posture and carefully looked at both her and Yuba.

"Also, this may be a little early, but I wanted to take this opportunity to inform the two of you of something." Rio adjusted his posture and looked at the two of them.

"What's this about?" Yuba asked.

"I'm thinking of leaving the village by this time next year," Rio said, cutting straight to the point.

"I see... It's a little sad, but it is what it is. Will you be returning to the land where you were born?" Yuba asked with a smile filled with loneliness.

"That's right. There are many other places I want to stop by first, but eventually..." Rio confirmed with resolution in his eyes.

"You'll come to this village again someday, right? This isn't goodbye forever, is it?" Ruri, who had been listening silently, asked as she watched Rio's face.

"...That's... Yeah. I'd like to come back, if you'd have me." Rio smiled, somewhat troubled, as he nodded with hesitation.

"Of course we'd love to have you! What are you saying?!"

"That's right — come back anytime. This is your hometown, too, and you are a member of our village."

Ruri and Yuba both responded immediately, inviting Rio back. Rio thanked them both, happy to hear their reply.

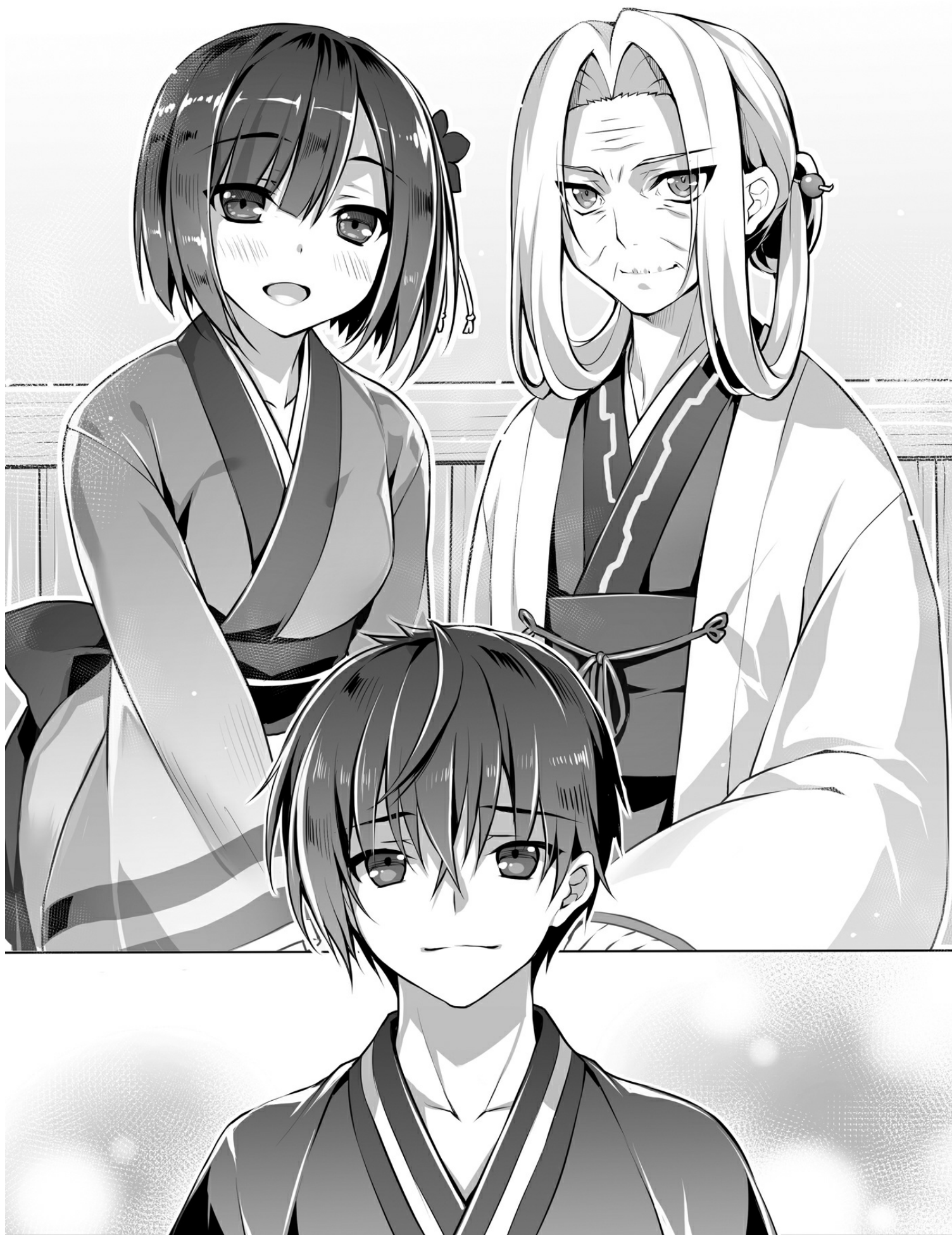
"By the way, if there's somewhere you have to go, does that mean there's someone waiting for you there? If so, I'd like to hear about it. Won't you tell us?" Ruri asked, curious.

"...While we're not related by blood, there's a child who thinks of me as an older brother, and a few other people who took care of me," Rio answered a little shyly.

“Huh, so there are people like that. Is the one who treats you like a brother a little girl?”

“Well, yeah...”

“Heh, figures. But, well, if that’s the case, then we can’t keep you here forever. If she’s a little sister to you, then she’d be my cousin, too, so introduce her to me someday. Hey, tell me her name!” Ruri asked one question after another.



And so, Rio was on the receiving end of Ruri's barrage of questions for some time.



A few days passed since Rio explained his background to Ruri.

With the fall harvest festival having come to an end, the village was entering its farming off-season before winter. At present, the villagers were preparing for staying in during the winter, as well as starting some farming work in preparation for next year.

However, for a hunter, this was the busiest season of the year.

Rio normally helped out in the fields during the afternoon, but ever since he returned to the village, he spent every day hunting until dark, catching prey to be processed into preserved food. Naturally, the amount of contact he had with the non-hunter villagers decreased, and he had pretty much only seen Yuba and Ruri as of late.

"Hey, Rio. Have you seen Sayo since you returned to the village?"

One morning, as Rio was preparing to go hunt in the hunters shed, Shin approached him.

"No. I've been busy with hunting, so I haven't seen her..."

"Sayo's been asking after you lately. Does he seem busy with his hunting duties, does he look like he's doing well... It's annoying, so go see her at least once," Shin said in a slightly blunt manner.

"I apologize — it seems I have caused her to worry. I wanted to greet the others properly, too, so I'll make some time either today or tomorrow to go see her," Rio replied with an apologetic look of understanding.

"...Make sure that you do." Shin's face darkened with a conflicted expression, and he nodded curtly.



The next afternoon, Rio received permission from Dola to wrap up his hunting in the morning and head down the mountain. He made an effort to show up

where more people were likely to be gathered and briefly greeted everyone. After stopping at a few work areas, his final stop was a workshop where the village girls were gathered.

“Huh, Rio? What’s up?” Ruri noticed Rio’s presence first and came running over.

“Hey, Ruri. I figured I hadn’t greeted anyone since coming back to the village, so I wanted to show my face to the people I hadn’t seen yet.”

“I see. True, everyone was worried ‘cause you were gone... Wait, huh? What’s with the faces, everyone?”

Rio and Ruri had been casually holding their conversation as every girl present watched on with dumbfounded expressions. Once Ruri noticed that, she faltered.

“Tone!” The girls answered in unison.

“Tone?” Ruri cocked her head as Rio smiled wryly in realization of something.

“Your tone to Sir Rio! Why are you speaking to him so casually, Ruri?!” One of the girls pointed out, finally making Ruri understand the situation.

“Huh? Ah, that’s because...”

“What does this mean, Ruri?” Naturally, the girls all closed in on Ruri unanimously.

“No, umm...” Ruri’s gaze wandered, settling on Rio beside her for help. However, Rio took a nonchalant step back, adamantly taking on the role of an innocent bystander.

R-Rio!! Ruri stared at him with reproachful eyes.

You’re the one being interrogated, Ruri. If I stepped forward now, things would only get more complicated.

That may be true...! But still!

And so on. They exchanged conversation through their gazes, but to the girls, that only made everything seem all the more suspicious, and their silent pressure continued to grow stronger by the minute.

A cold sweat ran down Ruri's back at the keen gazes of the girls focused on her.

"W-We're living in the same house, so I asked him to stop talking to me in that stiff way all the time because it got tiring. It's no big deal, really." Ruri dodged the question with an adequate answer. She couldn't tell them the real reason: that they were cousins.

"....." The girls all looked at each other. It wasn't a reason they couldn't believe, but there was something still suspicious about it — the woman's intuition they held was telling them that.

"Ruri... told me quite some time ago to change my manner of speech, but is it so odd after all? I am afraid I am still not quite used to it..." Rio asked the girls worriedly at just the right moment.

"No, it's not odd..."

The girls weren't able to persistently hound Rio like they did with Ruri, so they shook their heads reluctantly. Because they stopped pursuing the topic for the moment, Ruri let out a sigh of relief.

Hmph, he doesn't even know how I feel...

Seeing the corner of Rio's lips curl up in amusement made Ruri pout, but Rio just started to speak to the girls with feigned ignorance. He apologized for worrying them when he left the village so suddenly, and so on.

"I've worried you too, Sayo. I heard from Shin."

"F-From my brother? U-Umm, did he say anything strange?"

"No, not particularly..."

"Is that so... Then, that's fine. So, umm, with Ruri..." Sayo seemed relieved, then muttered the start of a question.

"Yes, what is it?"

"I-It's nothing..." When Rio tilted his head, she timidly withdrew her words.

Chapter 8: An Unexpected Visitor

On a day after winter had arrived, when the villagers were holed up inside from the cold, Gouki visited the village without warning.

His business had to do with inviting Rio to visit Homura and Shizuku in the castle once more, so Rio departed for the capital again. It had been several months since they last met, but there was none of the nerves from last time as Rio calmly took part in the secret meeting.

“I’m sorry for calling you here so suddenly, in the cold,” Homura said after they exchanged some simple greetings and took their seats.

“No, there’s no work to be done in the village during winter to begin with.”

“Come to think of it, the last time we met, it was the fall season. We actually wanted to meet you a little earlier, but there was still much business we wanted to finish tending to first.” Being unable to meet their grandson when they wanted to was saddening — Homura sighed as though to say just that.

“Thank you for taking the opportunity to meet me during such a busy time.”

“No, it’s fine. Besides, we had something important we wanted to discuss this time.” Homura looked at him with a somewhat questioning look.

“Something important?” Rio asked, adjusting his posture.

“Yes. It has to do with you getting your revenge,” Homura said quietly.

“What would you like to discuss?” Rio questioned with a slightly stiff expression.

“Hm. First of all, I detest Lucius too. Emotionally, I wish for nothing more than to assist you... But, as the king, I unfortunately cannot leave this kingdom.”

“I believe that was to be expected...”

“...And that is why I thought of preparing a small number of retainers to gift you. They will lend you their strength on behalf of Shizuku and I. Won’t you use them as needed?”

“Huh... Eh?” The bombshell Homura dropped took Rio by surprise, making him freeze on the spot.

“What do you say?” Homura asked again, warmly watching over Rio’s dumbfounded surprise.

“U-Umm, no, I couldn’t possibly...” Rio expressed signs of his disapproval, but Homura wasn’t about to back down just like that.

“I plan on assigning you a dozen or so retainers. They will be led by Gouki and Kayoko.”

“...And did the others agree to the two of them?” Rio nearly felt like clutching his head in his hands, but he endured it with his mind of steel and voiced his question, looking over at Gouki and Kayoko within the room.

“Naturally,” Homura confirmed. Gouki and Kayoko also vigorously nodded their heads, and Rio finally realized that Homura and Shizuku were serious.

“If someone as great as Lord Gouki disappeared from this kingdom, I believe the repercussions would be significant, to say the least...” Rio addressed the main issue in a roundabout way.

Gouki was renowned for being the greatest warrior of the Karasuki Kingdom. His strength was on par with an army of a thousand, and he had garnered great results and trust from the kingdom. For Gouki to abandon that and disappear without a trace, there would no doubt be an uproar within the kingdom.

“Worry not. The necessary arrangements regarding that have already been made — it’s the basics of politics.”

“...Is that so.”

Rio found himself at a loss for words, having been told so confidently that there was no problem. It was clear that they had considered their words carefully, so if he spoke without rationally forming his argument, he might end up sealing the deal.

“However, Lord Gouki has his family, not to mention the history of the Saga family and their public duties. What shall become of those?” Rio reasoned as he began his rebuttal.

“That is not an issue. The only ones to become your retainers from the Saga family are Gouki and Kayoko. Although, Komomo did say she will come along too, her being a retainer or not aside,” Homura said, glancing at Gouki and Kayoko.

“Yes. We will be bringing Komomo along, but my son and all the others will remain in this land. Thus, it shall not impede the continuance of the Saga family in this kingdom,” Gouki said in an unwavering tone.

“My destination — the Strahl region — isn’t a journey that can be so easily returned from. Lord Gouki alone may take several months to make the trip. There is a possibility you may not meet your family again.”

“As a warrior, one must always be prepared for the possibility of never seeing their family again when they venture onto the battlefield. This is no different,” Gouki said.

It was difficult to rationally argue against such views of life when brought up so instantaneously.

“No, but that isn’t the issue... How will you explain this to Lord Hayate and the others?”

“Though it may have been presumptuous of us, we have already explained everything to my son. Everyone has accepted it.”

“And that applies to the others accompanying us, too? Wouldn’t some of them feel reluctant to leave the kingdom?”

“Due to various circumstances, the others are all members of the undercover squad associated with my family. They have no kin, are devoted, and are all extremely skilled, so they shall not be a hindrance.”

“...However, there is no proof that that man — that Lucius is even alive,” Rio said, trying to convince Gouki not to accompany him.

“Sir Rio, this is an opportunity that we have yearned for for a long time. While our hatred for Lucius plays a large part of it, this is a once in a lifetime chance for Kayoko and I to fulfill the dearest wish we were unable to accomplish in the past. So, please, I beg this of you,” Gouki implored, bowing his head deeply at Rio.

With that, Rio finally understood. Gouki and the others weren't coming along because they were ordered to, they were coming along because they wanted to. His clumsy logical arguments weren't going to be enough to make them back down. But, even then, Rio had no intention of making Gouki and the others his retainers. It wasn't a matter of logic — he just didn't think he was strong enough to bear the weight of the lives of others. Which was why...

"I cannot accept your assistance. I appreciate the thought, but this is something I must do myself." Rio could only reject Gouki and the others' intentions.

"I see. So, it has come to this after all..." Homura groaned bitterly. It seemed he had predicted Rio's refusal from the beginning. Gouki and the others didn't seem to be too shaken, either.

"Rio... We hate Lucius just as you do, and we cannot rest easy until he bears responsibility. As we feel the same as you, we cannot allow you to shoulder all the burden of revenge by yourself," Homura said hesitantly to Rio.

"That is... Even so — no. Furthermore, it is not that I wish to look down upon you, but Lord Gouki and the others wouldn't be able to keep up with me." Rio shook his head firmly.

"What... do you mean? The party consists of the finest warriors in my kingdom. I find it hard to believe that they will not be able to keep up..."

"This is what I mean..."

It'd be faster to just show them; they would have no choice but to back down at the utter gap in their abilities. With that thought, Rio willingly revealed one of the tricks he had up his sleeve.

As he spoke those last few words, Rio used his wind spirit arts. A breeze stirred in the room, lifting Rio's body into the air. Homura and the others widened their eyes in mute amazement.

"Wha... A-Are you floating?"

"It's not simply floating. I can move by flying through the air. And so, you won't be able to keep up with me just by enhancing your physical body with spirit arts, since I can fly right over any obstacles."

The hand that Rio revealed was incredibly effective; Homura and the others listened to Rio's commentary in awe.

"...To think that wind spirit arts could be used in such a way... Gouki, you specialize in wind spirit arts. Can you do the same?" Homura asked. Gouki's face twisted in frustration.

"...I cannot," he replied.

So, this was the gimmick behind the extraordinary speed he showed during the sparring match. I see... Gouki realized with chagrin.

If it was just using wind to push his body from behind, then Gouki was capable of it, too, but he couldn't use it in a real combat situation. If he made any sort of error in output force or direction, it would have conversely placed him in even greater trouble.

"Can you think of anyone else who can do this?"

"...No, I cannot. I myself am capable of creating a gust of wind and sending myself through the air, but when it comes to floating in the air with such stability..."

"Is that so... I understand. Rio, we will back down for now. But, please, would you keep this offer in the back of your head? You may change your mind before you depart."

"...I understand."

Though he doubted that would happen, Rio agreed.



The day after he declined the gift of retainers from Homura, Rio was staying at the Saga residence, just like the last time he was in the capital. There, Komomo had badgered him until he agreed to join her in training practice. Once their training had lulled, Komomo suddenly asked him a question.

"Will you be heading toward the far western lands, Sir Rio?"

"Yes, that's right," Rio nodded.

"Umm! I wish to accompany you, Sir Rio!" Komomo proposed without a

moment's delay. Her face had an expression of true purity as she looked up at Rio with a cheerful grin.

"...You can't."

Komomo's puppy eyes held a charm that caused any person, regardless of gender, to fall for her demands, but Rio somehow managed to resist them.

"I can't... no matter what?"

"No matter what." Rio shook his head curtly.

"Aww..." Komomo puff her cheeks in a pout.

"Lord Gouki, please refrain from using your daughter as a means of temptation," Rio raised as an objection, seeing straight through the instigator behind her. He turned to give an exasperated look to Gouki, who was watching the training take place from beside them.

"Hum, it seems I've been seen through."

"Obviously. Even for Komomo, the journey would be far too harsh for a ten-year-old girl, you realize? Please, don't be absurd."

While there had been a precedent before, Rio chose not to mention Latifa.

"But Komomo has acquired the ability to enhance herself through spirit arts. The long road would be a good learning experience for her."

"No, it's not meant to be a learning experience..."

While the long and harsh journey may indeed be a good learning experience, the muscle-headed optimism of treating it as a training opportunity made Rio sigh. The fact that Komomo herself was ready and rearing to go left him at even more of a loss.

"At any rate, the only one who will be heading to the Strahl region is me."

"...That is true. The earlier meeting showed just how resolute you are. If you are adamant that it is impossible, then we mustn't insist on accompanying you anymore." Gouki smiled wryly with a small shrug.

"Huh? Uh, right..." Rio was taken aback at how easily Gouki gave up. To be honest, he had expected a bit more resistance, which was why he couldn't help

but send an examining look Gouki's way.

"Hm, what is the matter?"

"Ah, no. If Lord Gouki is fine with that, then I have no particular objections..." Fearing causing more trouble for himself, Rio refrained from asking any further.

"But it *is* a little lonely. We don't have very many opportunities to meet you to begin with, so to think of you leaving for somewhere far away is... You'll be returning to the village in a few days, yes?" Komomo hung her head as she expressed her feelings.

"Yes. Unfortunately, that is the case." Rio nodded with a troubled expression.

"Then, when does that mean we can meet again?"

"Let's see... That would depend on the availability of His and Her Majesty, but I believe the earliest would be next month..."

"After next month..." Komomo became even more gloomy.

"Komomo..." Rio looked down at Komomo with a conflicted expression.

"I... I wish to go to Sir Rio's village," Komomo whispered, looking up at Rio's face.

"To... my village?"

"Yes. I wish to remain by your side. I'd like to have you train me more, and I want to know what the village you are living in is like." Unable to hold back her tenacity, Komomo spilled all her desires.

While he couldn't permit her to follow him to the Strahl region, if it was only as far as the village, then Rio didn't mind at all.

"Well, there shouldn't be an issue as long as Lord Gouki and Yuba permit it..." Rio muttered.

"...Hm. There are no objections on my side. I haven't allowed her outside much ever since the kidnapping attempt, so it may be a good change of pace." Gouki began to consider it optimistically.

"Huh? Can I really?"

"I do not mind. While I am not so sure about other villages, this is the village

that Sir Rio is living in. Hmm... For now, I shall pen a letter to Yuba and discuss it with her,” Gouki said enthusiastically, walking from the training grounds toward the mansion to begin his aforementioned task.

“...I can go to Sir Rio’s village?!” Komomo asked Rio in delight.

“N-Not yet, it hasn’t been finalized...” Rio faltered and shook his head.

Was I a bit too hasty? he reassessed, but it was a little too late to wonder.

After that, arrangements were made in a flurry, and Komomo’s stay in the village was decided; it was for an extended period of time, along with her caretaker, Aoi. And as long as they had the time to do so, there was the added bonus of Gouki, Kayoko, and Hayate occasionally coming to visit.

Rio had a hunch that winter was about to get quite busy.



Several weeks later, Rio was walking through the village, showing Komomo around.

“It’s like a dream... Being able to come to Sir Rio’s village like this. The scenery is beautiful and the air is clear — I think it’s a wonderful place,” Komomo said with great delight.

“The capital is brimming with people, after all. You can’t enjoy this kind of scenery very often. I’m glad you find it to your liking, Komomo,” Rio replied with a slightly strained smile.



“If possible, I’d like to greet the people of the village... But there’s so many of them. Who would be best to start with?” Komomo said, looking around.

Many of the villagers remained indoors during the winter — no one went outside without a good reason to — but there were quite a few villagers around at the moment. The villagers were starving for entertainment, so they had probably gathered to have a look when they heard an upper-class figure was visiting the village. All the village’s attention was focused on the sweet sight of Komomo walking beside Rio with a smile, dressed in her favorite hakama.

“Shall we start with the other girls first?” Rio suggested, and they approached where the village girls were gathered.

“Hello everyone.”

“H-Hello, Sir Rio.” The girls returned Rio’s greeting rather nervously.

“I’d like to introduce this girl, who will be staying in our village for a while. Does everyone have a moment?”

“Y-Yes! That’s fine!”

“This is Saga Komomo, the little sister of Lord Hayate, who previously visited the village as a tax officer.” Rio introduced Komomo so that the surrounding villagers would be able to hear too.

“My name is Saga Komomo. I will be living in this village from today on. I’m very happy to meet you all — please treat me well!” Komomo put on an adorable smile and energetically introduced herself.

“S-Sir Hayate’s little sister? So she’s a lady... So cute...” When the girls laid their eyes on a real upper-class lady, they couldn’t help but gaze at Komomo in admiration.

“Oh my, thank you so much... But everyone here is beautiful, too,” Komomo said shyly.

The sight of her won over the hearts of all the village girls.

“U-Umm! How did you come to live in our village? May I ask what your relationship is with Sir Rio...?” One girl mustered the courage to ask.

“Sir Rio is my savior. He previously saved me when I was about to be kidnapped by some scoundrels in the capital,” Komomo replied, and Rio supplemented her answer.

“It was during the trip to the capital for village trade. Perhaps you remember it, Sayo? During that shopping trip...”

“Hweh... Ah! The girl from back then?” Sayo, who had been singled out by name, widened her eyes when she remembered what happened.

“Huh? What, what? What happened?! Tell us, Sayo!”

“Eeh? Umm...” Girls brimming with curiosity closed in on Sayo.

“Typical Rio. Constantly on his guard...”

“But like, isn’t this a chance for him to marry rich?”

“No way... Ruri already has the lead on us. We’ll never have a chance now.”

The other girls all whispered to each other, while the surrounding villagers also picked up on the situation and began to discuss it in amusement. Thus, the scene instantly grew noisier.

“What is everyone in an uproar about?” Komomo asked Rio beside her and cocked her head curiously.

“Haha... I wonder what indeed.” Rio’s dry laugh was drowned out by the noise.

“Ooh, L-Lord Rio. Whatever is the matter with all this fuss?” Hayate appeared along with Ruri and Komomo’s attendant, Aoi.

Rio’s heritage had already been revealed to Hayate, who hesitated briefly before addressing him as “Lord” in front of everyone. He widened his eyes at the sight of the villagers as they noisily chatted away.

“No, I was just introducing Komomo to the villagers...” Rio explained.

“Ahaha, it doesn’t seem like this fuss will die down any time soon,” Ruri laughed in amusement.

That night, a small welcome party was held in the village chief’s house for Komomo and the others.



The second day of Komomo's stay in the village...

Hayate, who had originally come along with Komomo as an escort, had already departed for the capital in the morning. Afterward, Komomo walked around the village with Aoi.

Whenever they passed any villagers, she would enthusiastically greet them and engage them in a short conversation. At first, Komomo would be treated reverently because of the difference in her social status, but thanks to her cute appearance and friendly demeanor, the villagers soon opened up to her.

"I'm back!" Komomo greeted energetically as she returned to the village chief's house with Aoi.

"Ah. Welcome back, Komomo." Ruri, who had been sitting in the living room, stood up to meet Komomo.

"I'm back, Ruri. Is Sir Rio not here right now...?" Komomo asked, glancing around the room.

It seemed as though the two of them had become closer with each other since the night before.

"Rio went out to the village farms with Granny. Something about building a water wheel and waterway before the spring."

"Waterway aside, what's a... water wheel? Aoi, do you know?" Komomo asked.

"I do not. I have never heard of it, either." Aoi shook her head regretfully.

"Apparently, a water wheel can automatically draw water and supply it to the fields," Ruri explained, drawing on what she had heard.

Komomo nodded in awe. "Something that convenient... Sir Rio sure has extensive knowledge."

"U-Umm. Excuse me!"

The voice of a visitor sounded from the entrance — it was Sayo's voice.

"Huh, Sayo? Welcome... What's wrong?"

“N-Nothing. I was nearby in the area, so... Are you busy?” Sayo spoke timidly as she looked around the room. When her blank expression met Komomo’s eyes, she faltered faintly, captivated by her cute face.

“You’re the one... that saved me along with Sir Rio, right?” Komomo asked with a tilt of her head.

“Huh? N-No. I just happened to be there...” Sayo denied in a fluster of hand gestures.

“You’ll get cold over there — come inside for now. Rio’s out with Granny right now, but I’ll pour you some tea,” Ruri said, inviting her inside.

“...Okay. Excuse me.” Sayo timidly stepped up to the living room.

“Hello again. My name is Saga Komomo. My attendant behind me is named Aoi. We’ll be staying in this village for a while, so we’ll be in your care.” They bowed to each other, before Komomo politely greeted Sayo. Aoi also bowed from behind her.

“I-I’m Sayo. It’s nice to meet you, Lady Komomo.” Sayo lowered her head with a nervous expression.

“There’s no need to be so formal... Please treat me like Ruri does,” Komomo looked troubled at being treated as though Sayo was afraid.

“I-I couldn’t possibly do that.”

“Ahaha, that’s just how Sayo is. Well, she’ll get used to it eventually,” Ruri said with a laugh.

“Aww, that’s a shame. By the way, how old is Sayo?”

“Umm, I’ll be fourteen in the new year. One year younger than Sir Rio.”

“Then, that would make you three years older than me. I hope we can get along.”

And so forth — the girls continued to chat amicably.

Then, after almost an hour of talking later, Yuba and Rio returned. “We’re back.”

“I’m home.”

“Welcome home!” Komomo adjusted her position to face them and got up to welcome them back with a smile.

“Thank you for welcoming us back, Komomo. I see that Sayo is here, too.” When he caught sight of Sayo sitting in the living room, his eyes widened slightly, and he lightly greeted her with a smile.

“Oh? Is Sayo here, too?”

“I-I’m intruding for a bit. Sir Rio, Lady Yuba.” Sayo timidly bowed to the two.

“Make yourself at home,” Yuba smiled brightly, welcoming her.

“Sir Rio, would you please assist me with training later?”

“Sure. We could even go right now, if you want?”

“Yes! Yes, please! Let’s get ready, Aoi.”

“Yes, Lady Komomo.”

Komomo nodded with pure delight, and returned to her room with Aoi. Rio’s lips turned up in a smile at the two of them, before going to his own room to get ready.

“It’s gotten much more lively with Komomo here. Rio isn’t bored, either, so it’s great,” Ruri said happily.

“...Yeah. That’s right. Sir Rio looks like he’s having fun,” Sayo agreed, her expression darkening with slight sadness.



Thus, their busy time together passed in the blink of an eye — before they knew it, Komomo had been in the village for a whole month. The new year had just started, and early into the year, the Saga family — Gouki, Kayoko, and Hayate — visited the village in secret.

Facing each other in the living room of the village chief’s house, Gouki greeted Rio on behalf of his family. “Sir Rio, we wish you a very happy new year.”

“Happy new year. I’m honored to have you visit during such a cold time.”

“This is nothing. The changing seasons will not impede our path to you, Sir Rio. We would swim through an icy lake to reach you, if need be.”

“...I’d appreciate it if you didn’t push yourselves too hard,” Rio said with a wry smile.

“Ahaha. Rio, you really are royalty,” Ruri laughed with exasperation.

At present, the only ones in the house were those who knew of Rio’s circumstances, with Gouki and the others acting like Rio’s retainers. It made Rio seem like an untouchable existence. Even the normally sociable Komomo was respectfully quiet today, remaining behind Gouki and Kayoko.

“My mother was royalty, but I am not. I don’t actually want you to be that formal toward me...” Rio said in a disconcerted manner, looking at Gouki and the others.

“From our point of view, you are no doubt someone to be respected. Naturally, we cannot so bluntly disregard your will, but we will exert our utmost effort to moderate ourselves...”

“...I am aware of that. However, please treat me normally in front of the villagers.”

“Of course,” Gouki nodded deeply.

“...Incidentally, Komomo hasn’t been causing you any trouble, has she, Sir Rio?”

“No, she’s been a very good child. Miss Aoi has been accompanying me for her training practices, too. She has been a great help.”

“That is... good to hear. Thank you very much for agreeing to our selfish demands. We have caused much trouble for Lady Yuba and Lady Ruri, too.”

“No, we’re grateful to receive the support you have provided the village as compensation. While our village may have nothing, I hope you can leisurely enjoy your stay here,” Yuba said graciously.

“I’m really happy to be friends with Komomo, too.” Ruri shook her head with a smile.

Gouki bowed his head to Yuba and Ruri. “We are most grateful. For now, we plan on staying for about three days.”

“In that case, I’d like to give my new years greeting to His Majesty Homura

and Her Majesty Shizuku, so if it isn't too much trouble, could I accompany you on your way back?" Rio proposed.

"O-Ooh! Is that so? We were actually hoping to ask you to head on over for a visit, Sir Rio, if I may so humbly say. His and Her Majesty would surely be delighted." Gouki smiled broadly.

He had actually been indirectly asked in advance by Homura and Shizuku, who had wanted to see Rio, so Rio's proposal was quite the timely offer.

After that, they pleasantly chatted for a while, and the Saga family's life in the village began. There were already rumors spreading among the villagers of the visitors, but because of Komomo, there wasn't as much of a commotion as last time when they heard it was the Saga family.

During their stay, Gouki took Hayate and Komomo out to go hunting, sparred with them two-against-one, and fully enjoyed many outdoor activities. Three days passed in no time.

On the morning of their return to the capital, eight people of various ages and genders were gathered before the village chief's house. Rio stood with the Saga family members being sent off, while Yuba and Ruri stood on the side doing the seeing off.

"Lady Yuba, thank you for your hospitality. It has been a long time since I've enjoyed myself so fully," Gouki said, thanking Yuba with a bright smile on his face.

"I'm glad to hear that you had fun. Thanks to your assistance, our stocks of preserved food have greatly increased." Yuba shook her head with upturned lips.

Beside her, Ruri was saying goodbye to Rio and Komomo.

"Rio, make sure you protect Komomo. Komomo, be careful on your way home."

"Got it. I'll be back soon." Rio nodded calmly.

"I'll be fine! I'll protect Sir Rio too!" Komomo agreed enthusiastically.

"Lady Ruri, please rest assured: my father and I will guarantee Sir Rio's

safety,” Hayate said to Ruri, having been listening from nearby.

“Geez. Rio’s strong enough not to need protection, so make sure you protect Komomo instead, Sir Hayate,” Ruri replied with an exasperated face.

“I-Indeed. However...”

“Ruri’s right. She’s your precious sister, so please protect her instead of me.”

Being told to prioritize Komomo by both the person that occupied his thoughts and the person he ought to protect, Hayate was at a loss.

“Hmph, I’ll be the one to protect Sir Rio, then,” Komomo pouted, sulking.



Once Rio and the others left for the capital, the village fell silent.

“It became so much quieter all at once. I hope Rio and Komomo come back soon,” Ruri murmured as she sipped at her tea in the living room of the village chief’s house.

There was practically no work to be done in the morning during winter, and with many of the villagers still asleep, Ruri had mostly been hanging out with Komomo and Rio. Now that the two of them were gone, loneliness welled up within her.

“If you’re like this now, what are you going to do when Rio really leaves the village? Lady Komomo will return to the capital when Rio leaves the village, too,” Yuba said with a wry smile.

“That’s right... Aah, it’s so lonely,” Ruri grumbled with a sigh.

“Why don’t you go talk to the village girls? You’ve only been with Rio and Lady Komomo lately, so you haven’t seen them much, right?”

“Well, everyone’s been holing themselves up indoors too, but I guess so. I haven’t spoken to Sayo lately, either... All right, I’ll be back later!” Now that that was decided, she went to visit Sayo’s house.

“Sayo, you here?” Ruri dropped by Shin and Sayo’s house, knocking on the front door as she called Sayo’s name. A slight commotion could be heard inside the house.

“R-Ruri? What’s wrong?” The door opened quietly but swiftly, revealing Sayo.

“Y-Yeah. I was wondering if you wanted to have tea together. Are you busy right now?”

“Nope. I’m free right now, so it’s fine.”

“Then, could I come in for a while? I haven’t spoken to you lately, after all.”

“Yeah... That’s fine, but... Umm, is Sir Rio out right now?” Sayo looked around as she timidly asked for Rio’s whereabouts.

“Aah, yeah. He’s gone to the capital with the rest of Komomo’s family,” Ruri said with a sigh.

“Is that so...” The tone of Sayo’s voice fell dejectedly.

“Sayo?” Ruri tilted her head curiously.

“Ah, erm, come in! Just be warned: my brother’s lazing about after eating, so it’s a little messy. I’ll get the tea ready right away.” Sayo invited Ruri inside and hurried into the house.

“Well, if it ain’t Ruri.” Shin was lounging about in the living room.

“What do you mean by that? Some greeting.”

“Nothing. You just haven’t shown your face around here for a while. What happened to Rio?”

“Rio’s gone to the capital with the Saga family.”

“Oh. I see... So that’s how it is.” Shin nodded in understanding, then glanced at Sayo as she prepared the tea, diligently extracting the tea flavor with boiled water.

“You should help Sayo out more, since it’s just the two of you living here. You’re making her do all the chores, aren’t you?” Ruri said tiredly, making Shin frown unhappily.

“...Shut up. Are you my mother?”

“That would be Sayo, not me.”

And so on. Ruri went back and forth with Shin until Sayo came over and

poured tea for the two of them.

“The tea’s ready. Here you go.”

“Sayo really is a good girl, unlike you,” Ruri muttered earnestly.

“And you, too,” Shin replied sarcastically.

Ruri laughed. “I know that already, sheesh. Aah, it’s been a while since we did this. It’s so calming.”

“Hm.” Shin snorted in dissatisfaction.

“Thanks, Sayo. And while I’m at it, you too, Shin,” Ruri said gratefully.

“What’s with you all of a sudden?” Shin stared fixedly at Ruri with suspicion.

“No, it’s just that I suddenly got lonely with Rio and Komomo gone. There’s a lot less opportunity to see everyone during the winter, so I just really wanted to see Sayo,” Ruri explained.

“There are times like that, yeah. I understand how you feel...” Sayo whispered her agreement.

“Right? That’s why I was starving to see you. There!” Ruri said, suddenly hugging Sayo, who sat beside her.

“Ahaha. It’d be nice if Sir Rio came back soon,” Sayo said, smiling embarrassedly.

“Yeah. You’re right. But he said this time it might take a little longer than usual.” Ruri pouted unhappily.

“...How long until he comes back?”

“He said it might take a month.”

“A-A month... That long...” Sayo’s expression darkened.

“Apparently there’s a lot of stuff that needs to be sorted out over there,” Ruri mumbled.

“I-I wonder what Sir Rio is doing over there,” Sayo questioned in a slightly high-pitched voice. She waited for Ruri’s answer nervously.

“Hmm... Apparently someone connected to the Saga family once knew Rio’s

parents or something.”

Ruri blurred the facts with a troubled expression. After all, she couldn’t reveal the truth.

“What? Rio was actually born somewhere nearby?”

“Eh, I don’t know about that. Rio said he’s been traveling for years now.”

Shin’s sharp observation made a cold sweat run down Ruri’s back.

Chapter 9: Omens of Farewell

Winter came to an end, making way for spring to come to the village.

In that time, Rio had gone to Homura and Shizuku to give them his greetings for the new year, then returned from the capital with Komomo and Aoi. After returning to the village, he threw himself into the tasks of installing the water wheel and waterway, aiming to complete its construction for the spring.

At present, the water wheel was in operation, drawing the necessary amount of water and passing it through the waterway to supply the fields. Furthermore, Yuba lent Rio one of the village's fields, and he began to take control of the farming there. He was requested to do so because the water wheel and waterway worked better than expected, causing an increase in the predicted harvest. Komomo and Aoi also offered to help; starting with Ruri and Sayo, several other villagers allocated their time to helping Rio.

At the moment, they were planting the seeds.

"Rio! I'm done planting the seeds in the area I was assigned!"

"Thanks. Can you help the people who haven't finished yet?"

"Sure thing!"

The sound of the two people conversing at a slight distance echoed through the surroundings.

"Sir Rio, Aoi and I have finished our assigned area!" Komomo also energetically announced the completion of her quota.

"Thank you very much. You can rest for a bit, Komomo."

Rio tried to be considerate of Komomo and Aoi, but Komomo shook her head enthusiastically. "I'm fine! I'll help the other people too!"

"Hey, Rio! Why are you treating her differently than me?" Ruri pretended to sulk.

"No, it's just... Komomo is a guest," Rio excused with a wry smile.

“Rio, Ruri’s going to step all over you at this rate,” one of the working villagers interjected teasingly.

“Hey, I wouldn’t do such a thing!” Ruri argued with puffed cheeks.

That caused the other workers present to burst into hearty laughter.
“Wahaha!”

Lately, Rio, Ruri, and Komomo had many more chances to be together as a group of three, so the villagers had become used to treating them as a three-person set. Furthermore, unbeknownst to the three in question, some people were gossiping that Rio was engaged to Komomo and Ruri as though it was fact.

Ruri was the only one Rio loosened his tone of speech around, and Komomo had been saved from danger by Rio before coming to stay at the village and sticking by his side around the clock, so their misunderstanding was understandable.

As a result, most of the girls that had secretly — or, rather openly — pined after Rio had given up on the fight, choosing to watch over the future of the three with warm eyes instead.

However, there were still some girls who hadn’t given up yet, and they continued to struggle in anguish.

The three of them look so close... How nice... Sayo watched the sight of Rio and the others from a distance with jealousy.

These days, Sayo hadn’t been able to find any time to talk with Rio properly, so seeing Ruri and Komomo working intimately with Rio made her feel extremely jealous. It was during this time that Rio took charge of one of the village fields and the helpers it required, so when Sayo heard about it, she couldn’t resist nominating herself.

However, Ruri and Komomo were still right by Rio’s side, and shy Sayo didn’t have the courage to close the distance between them.

“Shall I give you a hand, Sayo?”

Rio appeared before Sayo as she relentlessly planted seeds.

“Eh, ah, Sir Rio! I-I’m sorry! I was daydreaming!” Sayo stammered, snapping

back to her senses. When she looked around at her surroundings, she saw it was clear that only her work was notably slower than everyone else's. When she realized that, her faintly sunburned white cheeks reddened.

"Make sure you remember how to do all of this, Sayo. After I'm gone from the village, you may need to teach the other villagers what I've taught you. Well... Only if the results are good, that is." Rio hinted to his departure from the village, gauging Sayo's reaction.

"...Huh? Sir Rio, are you leaving the village?" Sayo asked with a dazed look.

"Yes. I haven't told anyone else yet, but I'm thinking of leaving between next fall and winter." Rio nodded with a somewhat wistful smile.

"Next... fall... Right, that's right. You're leaving. ...B-But, where will you go? If it's nearby, you could still come visit the village every now and then!" Sayo asked dumbfoundedly, clinging to a sliver of hope.

Rio shook his head regretfully. "I plan on crossing kingdom borders and traveling far away, so I can't guarantee I'll be able to periodically return. But I do want to visit the village again."

"But..." Sayo said in a trailing voice.

"It's still a little early, but I wanted to let you know ahead of time. We haven't really had the chance to talk to each other lately, and I've been having trouble coming to a decision, too..."

As Rio spoke about his feelings — "Nnh..."

Sayo was on the verge of tears before she knew it. When she noticed that tears were threatening to spill over, she ducked her head in a panic and rubbed her eyes.

"What's wrong, Sayo?"

"Ah, no, nothing! It's nothing! Just some dirt that got into my eye... Ah, I see now. There's soil on my hands." Sayo laughed with all her might and closed her eyes.

"Erm, I'll make some water with spirit arts. You can duck your head and wash it out." Rio tilted his head in slight suspicion, but chose to believe Sayo's words

and created a small bubble of water in his hand, manipulating it to float gently near her eyes.

Sayo thrust her face into the bubble and blinked rapidly. Not wanting Rio to realize she had been crying, she flushed her eyes with enough water to make them appear bloodshot.

“Ahaha. I’m sorry for such a shameful sight to see.”

“No, it’s fine... Do your eyes hurt?” Rio asked, voicing his concern for her.

“I’m fine! I’ll do my best to make up for where I fell behind!” Sayo shrugged him off with forced cheeriness. That was when Ruri arrived.

“Sayo, what’s wrong?”

“Ah, Ruri. Some dirt got in my eye, so Sir Rio was helping me rinse it out.”

“Aah, I see...” It wasn’t such a rare occurrence when working with soil, so Ruri accepted her words without question.

“Umm, I fell behind in my share of work, so I’m going to get back to that now.”

“Oh, I’ll help you.”

With that, Sayo returned to her seed-planting work with a look of enthusiasm and Ruri at her heels. Sayo devoted herself to the work at hand, because she knew she would burst into tears if she didn’t. Then, once work was over for the day, Rio thanked the villagers that assisted him.

“Good work, everyone! Thanks to your hard work, we were able to complete our target workload. Don’t forget what I taught you today — you’ll need to plant the seeds in the same way next year.”

It was already evening, so everyone split up and went their own way home. Among them were Ruri and Komomo, who called out to Rio energetically.

“Rio, good work! Let’s go home too?”

“There’s a lot more to planting seeds than I thought, Sir Rio. I can train in a different way to my usual practice with this!”

The three people living underneath the one roof — four people if Komomo’s

personal attendant, Aoi, was included — naturally went home together. Meanwhile, Sayo watched them absentmindedly from a short distance away, before walking toward her own home in the opposite direction. Her mood was strangely dark, enough to make the villagers she passed hesitate in greeting her. Once she arrived home, the strength drained from Sayo's knees as she sat down just inside the door on the clay floor.

“...”

She curled up and let the tears gush forth like a broken dam.

“I'm ho... H-Hey, Sayo?!” Shin arrived at the front door in a fluster, and his eyes widened at the sight of Sayo crying on the clay floor. She noticed Shin and raised her saddened eyes.

“What's wrong?! Did something happen?”

“...Shin. I'm sorry. I'm fine... It's nothing. I'll go make dinner now.” Sayo shook her head weakly and staggered to her feet.

“This isn't the time to be making food! Who was it? Who made you cry?!” Shin asked as he breathed heavily through his nose, desperately trying to think of the reason behind Sayo's tears.

The first thing that came to his mind was Rio.

Vexing as it was to admit, the only person who could upset Sayo's emotions this much was him. The biggest proof of that was how Sayo was clutching the hairpin she received from Rio tightly in her hand.

“That asshole... Rio must have done something.”

Shin decided there could be no one else who would have made Sayo cry.

“N-No... It's not... Sir Rio's fault...” Hearing Shin's voice trembling with anger made Sayo explain herself in a panic, but she couldn't speak all that well, as she was overcome with tears. Seeing his sister like that made the fury within Shin boil over even more.

“That guy should have never come to this village.” Even as he said those words, Shin knew in the back of his mind that it wasn't right.

Thanks to Rio's contributions in the village, their lives had definitely gotten

better, and if Rio hadn't been here, Ruri and Sayo would've suffered greatly at the hands of Gon.

Because of that, he had secretly accepted Rio's existence in the village.

Seeing the sight of his sister crying before him, however, made him doubt if it would have been better if Rio hadn't come to the village at all. If he hadn't, then at least Sayo wouldn't be crying right now.

"No, you're wrong... Sir Rio is going to leave the village... That's why..." Sayo desperately tried to stand up for Rio's innocence.

"...What did you say? He's leaving the village?" Shin frowned greatly at that.

"No, Sir Rio doesn't have anything to do with it..." Sayo tried to emphasize Rio's irrelevance to her current disposition, but it was already too late.

"He's going to leave the village... So that's why!" Once Shin connected the dots, a sour expression took over his face.

It was true that Rio was originally an outsider; he came to this village during his travels, so it made sense for him to leave on another journey. But, that meant Sayo would keep crying.

What could he do? How could he stop Sayo's tears?

Shin desperately tried to think things through, but he wasn't the type of person who solved things with his head. Shin knew that better than anyone.

That was why thinking made him lose his cool and rush out of the house instead. Rather than thinking about it any further, he'd act on his instincts.

"Eh?! S-Shin?! W-Wait!" He could hear Sayo's voice try to stop him from behind, but he paid her no mind as he ran with all his might. He made a beeline straight for Yuba's house.

"Oi, Rio! Is Rio here?!" Shin burst through the front door with a burning face, yelling for Rio. Rio and the others, who had been preparing for dinner, widened their eyes in surprise at the sudden appearance.

"...What do you want with Rio?" Yuba questioned with a suspicious look.

It was fairly rare for Shin to have business with Rio to begin with, but his

desperate expression showed it was no trivial matter. Just what could it be about?

“Please, stay in the village!” Shin said, and knelt on the ground.

“Wha...?!” Rio and the others were all rendered speechless at Shin’s truly sudden, erratic behavior.

“I-I know I’m being selfish with this request! But, please, hear me out for a moment. Could you stay in the village forever?!”

Sayo was crying — Shin wasn’t able to say those words out loud, so he rubbed his forehead against the ground instead. Rio and the others were dumbfounded and rendered unable to speak.

It was then that Sayo suddenly appeared, panting for breath.

“S-Shin! What are you doing?! I-I’m sorry that my brother has caused you so much trouble!” Her eyes rounded at the sight of Shin bowed on the ground, before she lowered her head in a panicked apology.

“But... Sayo—” Shin began to say something unpleasantly.

“C-Come on, Shin. You’re being such a bother. Let’s go, okay?” Sayo pulled at Shin’s body frantically.

“...” Shin glanced over at Sayo’s face to see her fake smile; there were traces of tears at the corners of her eye. While her tone was gentle, her urgency clearly shone through. “A-All right... Sorry.” Shin lifted his body up sluggishly.

“I’m truly so sorry! I’ll give my brother a stern talking to!” Sayo promptly apologized with her head bowed.

“S-Sorry...” Shin awkwardly lowered his head.

“...Okay. We won’t ask what that was about for now. Is that all right, Rio?” Yuba asked, sighing tiredly.

“Sure, I don’t mind...” Rio nodded, looking over at Sayo and Shin inquiringly.

Stay in the village... That’s because of what I told Sayo about today, right? But why would Shin come to me... Rio tried to think of the intention behind Shin’s actions, but he couldn’t understand the heart of another.

At any rate, he couldn't bear the sight of Shin and Sayo both lowering their heads at him.

"T-Thank you very much! Come on, let's go, Shin." Sayo thanked them in relief and dragged Shin away. The silence continued for several moments after their departure.

"Lady Komomo, Miss Aoi, I apologize on the behalf of our villagers. Shall we have our meal, now? Ruri, get to cooking," Yuba said to dispel the mood.

Thus, everyone exchanged a look before nervously resuming their actions. Though they didn't talk about what had just happened, the uncomfortable atmosphere continued into supper.



After dinner, when everyone had retired for the night, Yuba visited Rio's room.

"Rio, are you still awake?"

"Yes, I'm awake."

The question had come from just outside his door, so Rio replied in a quiet voice.

"I'm coming in."

"Go ahead."

Rio stood up from his bed and opened the door to welcome Yuba inside. He pulled up a cushion for Yuba to sit on as he sat down on his own bed.

"...Did you tell Sayo?" After several seconds of silence, Yuba suddenly charged straight into the core of the matter. She chose not to specify what they talked about on purpose.

"Yes. I did."

"I see. Then, do you know the reason as to why Shin acted that way?"

"...I'm sorry. To be honest, I have no idea. Do you know, Yuba?" Rio shook his head apologetically, fearfully asking back.

"Probably... However, it is not something that should come out of my mouth.

The people in question wouldn't want that, after all. It would not be right of me."

"...I see."

"The only thing I can tell you is that this incident is not your fault, so there's no need to blame yourself for any reason. Understand?" Yuba warned at Rio's shamed nod.

"That's..." Rio's expression darkened as he avoided answering.

"Well, I know that just telling you this won't ease your worries. Could I ask you to trust your grandmother this once, and leave this situation to me?"

"Yuba..."

"Though, there's not much I can do. I'll try to talk to those two indirectly about it. For now, could you interact with them without prying too much into it? Of course, if they choose to make the first step, then I would want you to engage with them about it," Yuba said with a light shrug.

"I understand. I'm sorry for making you bear the burden..."

"It's fine — try relying on your family a little more. You're saddled with enough to begin with."

"...Yes." Yuba's words must have reached him, as Rio hung his head when he nodded.



After that incident, they returned to what seemed like peaceful days on the surface. Since they often saw each other during the hunt, Rio had to face Shin sooner rather than later.

"Sorry for the other day... But, could you give us a little more time? For me, and for Sayo. You might have no idea what I'm talking about, but it isn't the right time to give you an explanation yet... Though I may bring it up again one day," Shin said awkwardly, his expression strangely serious for once.

"I understand. I intend on leaving the village before next winter, just so you know."

Rio widened his eyes at the admirable attitude that Shin normally didn't show. He recalled the words Yuba said to him, and decided to wait patiently for their reply until he had to leave the village.

Thus, he was able to return to a normal relationship with Shin relatively easily, but the harder one to repair was his relationship with Sayo. Of course, they still spoke to each other when they were working in the village together, and it wasn't as though they were acting distant with each other on the surface, but the amount of time he had to speak with Sayo when they were alone definitely decreased.

In effect, it became nonexistent.

It seemed that Sayo was the one who was intentionally keeping her distance from Rio. Because of that, Sayo's position in the three-person group she used to form with Ruri and Rio had become completely replaced with Komomo instead.

Other than the times Komomo returned to the capital with Rio on his visits to Homura and Shizuku, she was practically always in the village. Other members of the Saga family would also drop by whenever they had the time, completely adapting themselves to the village lifestyle. By the time summer had arrived, they could even be found carrying a hoe rather than a sword.

Once summer came around, Rio informed the other villagers that he officially intended to leave sometime in the days after the autumn harvest festival. The villagers were extremely saddened by the news, but they set about preparing for the harvest festival with even more vigor now that it included Rio's farewell party.

Thus, the seasons passed by in the blink of an eye, and finally fall arrived.

Chapter 10: A Resolute Departure

It was the long-awaited day of the harvest festival. Coincidentally, it had also been exactly one year since the day Gouki and the others appeared before Rio.

“Rio, the pie’s done baking!”

“The soup is simmering steadily here!”

“L-Lady Komomo! It’s dangerous to peek into the pot like that.”

Just like last year, Rio was cooking in the kitchen of the village chief’s house; this time, however, the members were different than last year, where it was just Ruri and Sayo. At present, there were four others apart from Rio in the kitchen: Ruri, Komomo, Aoi, and Kayoko.

While Kayoko silently worked away at cooking her specialty foods, the other members were working together to make the same kamutan and pie as last year. Ruri was used to cooking, but Komomo only started learning bit by bit when she came to live in the village, so she was still somewhat dangerous in the kitchen. In contrast, her mother Kayoko was cooking with tremendous knife skills.

Once the food was safely completed, they carried the dishes out to the square where the main venue was. The men of the village were already drinking, singing, and dancing with plenty of excitement. Among them was Gouki, who mingled with the rest of them with merriment. He seemed to be winning at a sumo-like sport with a consecutive streak.

“There are no social ranks here! Anyone with confidence in their skill may challenge me freely!” Gouki announced loudly, naked above the waist.

“Go get ’em, General Gouki!”

“Dola, it’s your turn!”

“Don’t be crazy! There’s no way I’d win!”

The men of the village raved on.

“...I can’t believe he had the nerve to leave Sir Rio and enjoy the banquet alone. I must have a word with him later,” Kayoko muttered in a cold voice as she spotted Gouki.

“No, please don’t worry about me. There are no ranks here, after all.” Rio shuddered softly as he quietly sent Gouki a lifeline.

“I understand,” Kayoko replied with a slightly disappointed look.

“All right! We’ve made kamutan again this year! Anyone who wants a serving, get in line!” Ruri yelled at the people in the square.

The villagers all gathered at once and worked together with the village ladies serving the kamutan for quite some time.

“We should join them and start eating, too, Komomo. I’m starving!”

“Yes. The kamutan Sir Rio made... I’m looking forward to it!”

Ruri and Komomo served their own helpings of kamutan.

“Thank you very much for your assistance. I apologize for making someone of your status work like this. If you’d like to, I was hoping we could eat together.”

“We have been invited to this harvest festival by the kindness of Lady Yuba — the least I could do in gratitude is assist. To receive Sir Rio’s words of gratitude, on top of having a meal together...” Kayoko said in an extremely humbled manner.

“No, this is just a simple village. There’s no need to act so formal in front of the others... Not to mention, Komomo is always eating together with us, so it’s too late for that now. Come this way,” Rio said, walking toward the area where Ruri and Komomo were sitting.

Hayate was also there — it was the area allocated for welcoming the Saga family. And so, they all sat down and began their meal as they chatted pleasantly amongst each other. Eventually, Gouki returned to join the conversation, too.

Around an hour later, Sayo hesitantly approached Rio.

“U-Umm! Sir Rio! Do you have a moment?” she asked him. The eyes of everyone present gathered on her. Sayo was trembling with a terribly nervous

face.

“Yes. How may I help you, Sayo?” Rio looked up at her hovering figure and noticed she was wearing a familiar hairpin in her hair. He smiled — happily, for some reason.

“U-Umm. I wanted to talk to you...” Sayo was being very timid, but a strong will could be seen in her eyes.

“Sure. Shall we move somewhere else, then?” Rio suggested. He also wanted to talk to her before he left.

“Y-Yes. If possible, then, please.”

“I understand. Everyone — please excuse me for a moment,” Rio notified the others apologetically before rising to his feet. Then, he walked to an isolated area with Sayo.

Komomo was staring after the two of them with a slightly befuddled expression.



On a roadside where the hustle and bustle of the banquet could be faintly heard, Rio and Sayo stood facing one another. Sayo was shaking in extreme nervousness.

Rio spoke first. “...You’re still using that hairpin.”

“Ah, yes.” Sayo nodded uncomfortably.

“Was it around spring when Shin asked me to stay in the village, and you and I became estranged?”

“...Yes. I’m sorry for causing you so much trouble at the time.” Sayo bowed her head apologetically.

“You weren’t any trouble — I was just worried that I said something that hurt you, or that maybe you hated me now,” Rio said, letting out a troubled and bitter laugh.

“That’s not true! It’s impossible! You didn’t do anything wrong...”

“Could I ask you one thing?” Rio asked out of the blue, making Sayo nod

stiffly.

“...Yes.”

“On the day that Shin appeared before me... Did that have something to do with me telling you I was leaving the village?”

“It... did. The one who didn’t want you to leave the village was actually me. That day, when you told me you were leaving the village, I... I got really sad... And was crying when I got home. My brother went wild when he saw me... and acted on my behalf...” Sayo could feel her heart thud as she spoke. Her whole body was burning, yet she was trembling as though she was cold.

“So that’s... what it was... Sayo, I...”

Rio’s expression darkened bitterly. He felt deep regret as he tried to tell Sayo there was no change in his mind to leave the village.

“U-Umm! There was something I wanted to tell you...” Sayo said with determination.

“...Sure, what is it?” Rio asked, focusing his eyes on Sayo’s face.

“Umm, that is... I know you might find it a nuisance to hear this, but... I-I... I like you, Sir Rio!” Sayo suddenly bowed her head as she confessed to him.

“...”

The surprise confession made Rio flinch. He looked down at Sayo’s lowered head, dumbfounded, and wondered what he should say to her.

What would be the proper response? The answer to that was obvious: it was either to accept or reject her words.

But, once he reached that point in his thought process, Rio instantly had the answer of which one he should pick.

He had known from the very beginning.

“...I’m sorry. I cannot return your feelings, Sayo.” Rio clenched his hands into fists and shook his head as though to stifle the pain in his heart.

“...I-Is that because you’ll be leaving the village, Sir Rio?” Sayo’s face twisted with heartbreak, but she seemed to have been prepared for the rejection as she

asked that question.

“That isn’t the sole reason, but yes,” Rio said, deciding to reply truthfully about his feelings.

“Then — please take me with you!” Sayo proposed immediately.

“...That would be impossible, Sayo.” Rio’s eyes widened at Sayo’s instant response with no sign of hesitation, but he still shook his head.

“It’ll be fine! I worked my hardest so that I wouldn’t be a hindrance! For this past year, I’ve been practicing spirit arts every single day!” Sayo insisted with desperation.

“You did such a thing...” Rio could keenly feel Sayo’s emotions, rendering him speechless in spite of himself.

Half a year ago would have been springtime; she probably started practicing soon after Shin had groveled at Rio’s feet.

All in order to...

“Please. Take me with you. I-I want to go. I’ll do anything... I’ll work my hardest to not get in your way, so, please!”

Sayo was desperate — she bowed her head in a show of that desperation.

“...I’m sorry, but that isn’t the issue. I have no intention of returning your feelings,” Rio said regretfully, averting his eyes from Sayo.

“T-That’s fine. You don’t have to look at me. You don’t have to do anything... Just... At the very, very least... Let me stay by your side. Please.”

Tears fell from Sayo’s eyes as she grabbed Rio’s hand. She was desperately trying to make an appeal for her feelings.

“Sayo... I’m sorry. I’m really sorry,” Rio apologized, face twisting with guilt. After much thought, those were the only words he was able to put together. He wasn’t tactful enough to think of anything better.

He felt ashamed — did those feelings originate from his guilt toward Sayo, his sympathy toward Sayo, or his own hatred for himself? No one could know. The only one who would know was the person himself, but not even Rio knew.

“Fweh... Uuh... G-Guh... Sniff.”

After letting go of her painful grip on Rio’s hand, Sayo was unable to hold back her tears, having a keen understanding that it was pointless.

It was Sayo’s first heartbreak, but somehow, she knew. She had seen it coming... That this love would be fruitless. She knew, because she could feel that Rio was in a very far away place.

However, for Sayo, who was in the middle of experiencing her first love, she wasn’t able to give up and completely close off any possibilities.

That was why she had to do something. Yuba had told her that Rio was firmly determined, no matter how much she tried to stop him, so she had to desperately think of another effective option other than stopping him.

That was when Sayo came to realize that if Rio would leave, even if she tried to stop him, then she should just follow him instead.

That being said, in order to do that, she had to, at the very least, not be a hindrance. However, it was clear that just dabbling in spirit arts wasn’t enough for her to satisfy that.

She also didn’t think that she could fill that gap in the half-year before Rio left the village.

Even then, Sayo desperately worked her hardest. Even if it didn’t work out, she blindly exerted herself with the hope that her devotion would be acknowledged.

And yet... it still wasn’t enough.

“...”

Rio couldn’t bear to watch Sayo breaking down in tears before him. He almost placed a hand against her shoulder without thinking, but clenched his fist tightly and stopped himself.



There were no words that he could offer Sayo right now. Even if he spoke gently to her, he wouldn't be able to do anything more than that. Since he couldn't return her feelings, he would only be hurting her more with his half-hearted kindness.

With that thought, Rio turned on his heel, silently, his expression twisting in pain. But he slowed for a moment as he departed, fixing his gaze on the shade of a tree a slight distance away.

Then, the presence he felt from the shadows wavered faintly.

...Forgive me, Shin.

Rio whispered an apology in his heart, then distanced himself from Sayo with resolute steps.

"S-Sir Rio, wait..."

"..." He said nothing to Sayo's weakly-spoken voice.

The distance between Rio and Sayo was close, yet hopelessly far. With no other option, Sayo could only continue to cry.



Meanwhile, Shin was glaring at Rio's departing figure from behind the trees.

That jerk knew I was here. He really is an awful guy. He clicked his tongue and frowned.

Although he wanted to follow his impulse to run after Rio and beat him up, he knew nothing would come of it.

After all, it wasn't Rio's fault.

Shin gave an aggravated sigh and looked at Sayo instead. She was still crouched over the ground, crying. While there were barely any people around during the festival, that didn't mean there was no one at all.

"Damn it!" Shin scratched at his head roughly and briskly walked off. There was no hesitation in his steps as he made a beeline for where Sayo was crouched.

"Oi, Sayo."

When Shin called out to her, Sayo's dainty body flinched.

"Bro...ther?" Sayo looked up at Shin with the face of an abandoned puppy as she cried.

"Are you giving up? You're satisfied now, right?" Shin suddenly asked in a voice laced with irritation.

"I-I'll give up. B-Because... I was rejected... It's no use anymore," Sayo mumbled with her head hung low.

"Oh, really. You're giving up. Well, I don't care either way. Who would want to give their precious little sister away to a good-for-nothing like him, right?" Shin said offhandedly, which made Sayo look up at him with sullen eyes.

"D-Don't speak badly about Sir Rio."

"Hey, hey — are you sticking up for trash like him? I have no idea what he was so burdened with, but he always had such a depressing face."

"...Stop it, otherwise I'll get mad, Shin." The normally docile Sayo's voice was filled with rarely-seen anger.

"Sure, the girls may find his face somewhat nice to look at. He can handle household chores and handiwork without a problem, and he's strong enough to beat the crap out of Gon and those other bastards. ...Wait, shit, saying it out loud is making me even more annoyed. But that's just how unpleasant that guy is. A sly and shrewd jerk!" Shin ranted on and on about Rio with negativity.

"Shin! How can you say such horrible things?!" Sayo flared up.

"Hah? I could say the same for you! How could you stick up for a guy like that?! Shouldn't you hate him? He's the guy who rejected you. Haven't you given up already?" Shin asked provokingly.

"I-I don't hate him. It's not his fault!"

"Huh? Are you stupid? Do you love him, then?" Shin questioned further with a dubious look.

"...There's no way I could hate him."

"I'm asking if you love him. Are you dumb?" Shin finally looked down on Sayo

in exasperation, making Sayo get worked up.

“That’s right! I’m dumb! I love him!” she cried out.

“DON’T GIVE UP, THEN!” Shin yelled back without a moment’s delay.

“...?!” Sayo, in spite of herself, could not find the words for a rebuttal.

“You love him, don’t you?! So why are you giving up after being rejected just once, after you worked so hard on practicing your spirit arts every day for half a year?! You gotta be kidding me!”

“Because he’s leaving the village! I don’t know what to do!!”

“You either wait for him to return, or you follow him!”

“W-Wait for him... But I don’t know when he will return! What if he comes back and then leaves again?”

“Then follow him!”

“D-Don’t be absurd! I don’t even know where he’s going!”

Shin had an illogical counterargument for every remark, making Sayo unable to hold herself back from arguing.

“Shit, that’s right. Then you’ll just have to wait. You’d better be prepared to wait as many years as it takes, until you’ve become an old lady.”

“...If I became an old lady, he wouldn’t even look at me anymore,” Sayo muttered offhandedly.

“Good grief... You two over there. Your voices are rather loud.” Gouki appeared out of nowhere and spoke in a tired voice.

“?!” The thought of their conversation being overheard by other people made Sayo glance around with a bright red flush on her cheeks.

“Don’t worry — there’s no one around other than me. Although that may not have been the case if you continued to argue like that,” Gouki said with a wry smile, reassuring Sayo.

“You’re Sir Hayate’s father...”

“Indeed. I am Saga Gouki.”

“Were you... eavesdropping? That’s not very nice of you.” Shin glared at him unhappily.

“S-Shin! Don’t be rude!” Sayo reprimanded him in a panic.

“You’ve got guts, boy. Interesting. I wasn’t intentionally eavesdropping — you two were simply having your sibling fight at a volume I couldn’t help but hear. So I decided to step forward.” Gouki laughed with a snort.

“...And? What do you want? If you’re just here to laugh, then I’ll have to ask you to leave.”

“I’d like to speak with that girl over there. You may leave first.”

“As if I’d leave my precious sister behind.” Shin stood before Gouki with a sullen expression.

“Hm. Then, listen quietly. Are you in love with Lord Rio, girl?”

“Eh... Y-Yes,” Sayo replied with a timid nod.

“Enough to abandon the village of your birth?” Gouki fired a follow-up question immediately after she had responded.

“T-That’s...” Sayo stumbled over her reply for a moment.

“Forget it, then. It looks like I was mistaken.” Gouki turned to leave.

“W-Wait, please! I-I love him! I love Sir Rio!” Sayo grabbed Gouki’s sleeve in a panic, speaking out as though she were making an appeal for her feelings.

“...And those words are the truth?” A serious expression showed on Gouki’s face as he questioned Sayo’s resolve.

“Y-Yes!”

As the sun gradually started to set, Sayo’s voice echoed along the roadside of the village.



Several days later, the day for Rio to leave the village had finally come.

A huge crowd of people were gathered near the west gate of the village to see him off. Among them were members of the Saga family, too; while Homura

and Shizuku had already said their farewells before the harvest festival, he greeted them all in order, and said his farewells to the Saga family as well.

“Sir Rio, I hope that you won’t forget about me!” Komomo said, looking up with an uneasy face.

“Of course. I hope that you won’t forget about me either, Komomo.”

“Definitely! There’s no way I would ever!” Komomo nodded with a fist pump.

“Thank you, Komomo. ...Lord Gouki, Lady Kayoko, Lord Hayate. Please take care of yourselves. I’ll be looking forward to the next time we meet.” He looked at Komomo’s family members, who stood behind her, as he spoke.

“Those should be our words. Until the next time we meet, I shall sharpen my skills in anticipation, so thank you for everything.”

“Our whole family is much indebted to you. I look forward to the day we meet again.”

“To be honest, I keep being caught by surprise by... Lord... Rio. I believe we will meet again some day, so please take care of yourself on your journey.”

Gouki, Kayoko, and Hayate all offered their farewells.

“I will work diligently not to lose to you next time we meet. I wish you all the best.” Rio nodded with a cheerful nod.

“Go on, Sayo, you too. Don’t hold back!”

“Wawawah, Ruri!” Ruri pushed Sayo before Rio.

“Hello, Sayo,” Rio said with a faintly stiff smile. He hadn’t seen her since the confession.

“H-Hello, Sir Rio. Umm... Please take care of yourself.”

Despite seeming nervous, Sayo gave the brightest smile she could. In turn, Rio was also able to regain some of his ability to smile.

“Yes. You too, Sayo. Take care.”

“I-I’ll do my best. And, also... Sir Rio!” Sayo called Rio’s name with resolution.

“...What is it?” Rio tilted his head hesitantly.

“I’m going to do my best! I’ll do my best... So you do your best, too, Sir Rio!” Sayo said enthusiastically.

Rio’s eyes widened in confusion before he smiled in amusement. “...Yes. I’ll do my best. I’m very happy you came to see me off. Thank you very much.”

“I-It was nothing. I’m glad... Ahaha.” Sayo let out a breath of relief and smiled happily. She was almost moved to tears, but no tears of sadness spilled out.

“Aren’t you going to say anything, Shin?” Standing back beside them, Ruri turned the spotlight to Shin.

“Hmph. Well, take care, I guess. And you haven’t said anything either, Ruri.” Shin said bluntly.

“Ahaha, that’s because, y’know. I’ve already got my share of farewells in. Rio, make sure to visit if you have the time to come back. As often as possible, if you can,” Ruri said, flushing with embarrassment.

“Got it. I wonder... You might be married the next time we meet, Ruri,” Rio said, imagining the future.

“Ahaha, who knows. Oh, but if no one wants me as their bride, will you have me, Rio?” Ruri replied jokingly.

“...It’ll be fine. If it’s you, then I’m sure you’ll find someone wonderful to marry.” Rio evaded the question with a huff of laughter.

“Oh my, looks like I was rejected. Too bad. See you later, then, Rio.” Ruri shrugged with a small sigh and offered her hand out for Rio to shake.

“Yup, see you. I was really happy to be able to live like family with you, Ruri.” Rio returned Ruri’s handshake and nodded happily.

“We’re not *like* family, we *are* family. Even if we can’t tell anyone, you and I are cousins,” Ruri whispered in Rio’s ear.

“You’re right. Thank you, truly,” Rio said, smiling widely as he thanked Ruri.

Next, he addressed Yuba, who was standing nearby. “You, too. Thank you for everything.”

“Those should be my words. Like I said before, you’re welcome back here at

any time. That's why you must take care of yourself. Got it?" Yuba said with a huff of laughter on her lips.

"...Yes, thank you very much." Rio bowed his head deeply, and Yuba looked around.

"Now! Is there anyone who has yet to say their goodbyes?" she asked.

"Have a good trip!"

"Be careful."

"You can come back, but don't forget the souvenirs."

"I want alcohol!"

"Later!"

All the various voices of the village sounded off.

"...Doesn't seem like it. All right, Rio. Have a safe journey!" Yuba cackled heartily and sent Rio off with cheer.

Rio bowed deeply one last time. "Okay everyone, I'll be going now! I'll make sure to bring back souvenirs for you!"

With those final words, Rio turned on his heel and waved with a smile, before walking out of the village as all the villagers loudly yelled their goodbyes.

Rio turned and waved his arms furiously as the distance between him and the village gradually widened.

It was the fall season of the year 999 of the Holy Era.

Epilogue: In A World Like This

The year was 1000 of the Holy Era.

One day, several months after Rio had left the Yagumo region... Somewhere in the world, someone had been waiting for that moment, as though it had been predicted.

Looks like it's about time.

The Strahl region was reflected in their eyes. In the next moment, six pillars of light shot out of multiple points in the region, aiming straight up at the skies. The light pillars instantly tore through the heavens, overwhelming onlookers with their blinding light for some time.

However, the person in question simply observed the light with a blank expression.

Nothing's changed from a thousand years ago. Even so, the world's history is about to move. No... The chance of it moving has been birthed. Whether it changes, repeats, or stagnates like this...

Any further ahead than that was unknown to this person — therefore, they simply observed the now, and the future hereafter.

Oh? Seems like there are many lost children this time. Hm? This is...

Suddenly, they narrowed their eyes. No sooner than they did, their eyes opened in focus. A single human was reflected in their eyes.



Meanwhile, after the six pillars of light had lost their glow, in the southeast area of the Strahl region, two girls and a boy stood isolated in a grass-covered field.

One of them was a high school student in her uniform, one was a middle school student in her school uniform, and one was a primary school student in his casual clothes — no one wore clothing appropriate for traveling in a grassy

area.

The three children looked around at their surroundings in a daze. Their frozen expressions were understandable; the modern townscape they were surrounded by moments ago had completely disappeared, after all.

A grass field spread around them, with the only other things in sight being rocks, hills, and mountains, with no sign of anything man-made.

“...Where, is this?”

“...Don’t ask me.”

“Sorry. I wasn’t asking you — I was asking Miharū.”

The middle school girl and primary school boy went back and forth, not having yet accepted their reality. Shortly after, the two simultaneously looked up at the high school girl named Miharū.

“E-Erm, for now... L-Let’s check where we are on the smartphone.”

Miharū put on a smile to reassure the two and hurriedly took out her phone from her school bag. Then, with trembling hands, she pressed the button and started up the screen. “*Out of range*” was fruitlessly displayed at the corner of the screen.



Meanwhile, elsewhere in the Strahl region at the exact same time...

Haruto.

...haru... ...-er...

...-ve ...them.

The oddly-familiar voice of a girl echoed inside Rio’s head.



Afterword

Hello, everyone — This is Yuuri Kitayama. Thank you very much for picking up *Requiem for a Goodbye*.

It's been half a year since *Seirei Gensouki* Volume 1 first came out, and it feels like Volume 3 was released in the blink of an eye. In that time, Volume 1 received two additional printings. I can't even express how grateful I am to all the readers, Hobby Japan, and everyone else involved in the process.

And so, to begin with, I'd like to acknowledge everyone I am much indebted to!

The readers who always support my work; Editor N and the other editors at HJ Bunko; Riv, who drew so many beautiful, high-quality illustrations this volume too; the publishing sales department at Hobby Japan; the thorough and detailed proofreaders; each bookstore with my work on their shelves, and so on. Thank you very much! This book wouldn't have existed without the help of each and every one of you.

As I am still an inexperienced author only freshly debuted, there is still much knowledge that I am lacking, and I may make mistakes here and there, but I'll continue to work diligently, so I hope that you can stick with me for a long time to come.

Now, to change the topic suddenly due to lack of page space, Volumes 1 to 3 of this *Seirei Gensouki* series are actually a prologue, so to speak, and with the end of this volume, the main character Rio (Haruto) finally reaches the starting line of the story.

Normally, stories start from the first volume, with the main character having built a number of relationships and an established past. However, even before I made the plot of *Seirei Gensouki*, the first time I thought of writing a novel, I thought that having such backstories depicted in the story would make the later plot more interesting.

However, the darker sides of those stories are unavoidable, and sometimes make it difficult to act out a clear sense of exhilaration. At the same time, that is what will make future volumes more interesting, slowly and steadily — or, sometimes, all at once.

Finally, *Seirei Gensouki* has built up a reputation of increasing the number of pages as the volume number goes up, but I will try to make the next volume slightly more compact.

No, I will definitely do it!

Let's meet again in the next volume.

January 2016 Yuuri Kitayama

Bonus Short Stories

The Season of Dancing Flowers

On a day not long after Rio first visited the village...

It was springtime, and cherry blossoms were in full bloom. When the gentle wind blew through, the cherry blossom petals would flutter and dance in the air. As the sun made its way across the sky, work began to slow down. Rio was walking around the village, led by Ruri and Sayo.

“Come on, Rio. It’s over here.”

Ruri’s arm was entangled with Rio’s as she pulled him insistently.

“I don’t mind following you, but could you tell me where we’re going, Ruri?” Rio said to Ruri’s back.

To be honest, Rio had no idea where they were heading. He had just finished his work and stepped out into the garden to train when the two appeared and whisked him away, just like that.

“Ahaha. I wanted to introduce you to some work friends of ours. Everyone’s actually gathered already, and they’re all really curious about you, Rio. Isn’t that right, Sayo?”

“Yes. Everyone was asking us questions during work today, too. About you. They all said they wanted to meet you, so...” Sayo said hesitantly.

“That’s right. Everyone’s so persistent, saying they want to see Rio. Since it’d be a huge mess if they all came to the house at once, we decided to bring you to them instead.”

“I see, so that’s what this is all about. In that case, please lead me there.”

Rio was very grateful for their actions, since he wanted to familiarize himself with the village as quickly as possible.

“Leave it to me. Now, let’s go! Leading one customer to their seat!” Ruri

laughed happily and pulled Rio's arm.

A smile tugged at Rio's lips as he started walking. However, when he turned to look behind him, he saw Sayo standing there as still as a rock.

"Sayo?"

"...What's wrong, Sayo?"

Sayo snapped back to her senses with a gasp when the other two addressed her. "N-No, it's nothing. I was just thinking about how you two looked close..."

Ruri cocked her head in thought before calling Sayo closer to share her brilliant idea. "Really? Hmm... Ah, then you can come over here, too, Sayo!"

"O-Okay." Despite her confusion, Sayo hurried over.

"Okay Sayo, you're on my other side." Ruri said.

"Huh...?"

"You're going to help me guide Rio around from my other side, okay? Then the three of us will be close." Ruri pulled Rio's arm closer as she spoke to a shocked Sayo. She seemed to be telling Sayo to do the same as her.

"Haha..." Rio grinned bashfully. It didn't seem right to resist, so he gave in.

"Eh, ah, umm..." Sayo blushed and looked between her arm and Rio's.

"Come on, everyone's waiting! Hurry it up!" Ruri said, spurred Sayo into movement.

Rio forced down his embarrassment and tried offering his arm to Sayo. "...Erm, please look after me, Sayo." If he showed any embarrassment here, the mood would become unbearable.

"O-Okay. Then... Excuse me."

Sayo nodded hesitantly and quietly slipped her arm around Rio's. She seemed a bit nervous as she stared up unblinkingly. The three of them lined up together, and Rio smiled with a shy but peaceful smile.

"All right, now let's head out for real. Let's go!" Ruri nodded in satisfaction and walked them down the path between the rice fields in the direction they had to travel in.

Suddenly, a gust of wind blew around them, and the scenery around them became dyed a pale pink color

Way Home

In the village chief's house, less than one month after Rio started living with Yuba and the others. Rio, Yuba, and Sayo were doing a bit of handiwork together. Suddenly, the front door opened, and Ruri energetically burst in.

"I'm home! Whoa, huh? Sayo hasn't gone home yet? Everyone's already wrapped up and gone home." Once she stepped onto the clay floor, Ruri spotted Sayo in the living room and widened her eyes.

"Oh, is it that time already? We were completely focused on our work." Yuba paused in her work and looked at the outside scenery through the open front door.

Rio stopped his work and directed his gaze outside the front door too. "It's gotten a lot darker."

"Sayo, you should head home soon. Rio, will you walk her back?" Yuba requested.

"Sure, I got it," Rio agreed immediately. "Shall we go, Sayo?"

"I-It's fine. I can get back by myself. I don't want to trouble Sir Rio like that!" Sayo's cheeks flushed with embarrassment as she rejected Rio's offer.

"Sayo gets scared easily, so you have to walk her back. It's already dark, so there won't be many people walking around the village either, you know?"

"That's right — there's no need to be so reserved. Just have Rio walk you."

Ruri and Yuba shook their heads in unison.

"Are... Are you sure?" Sayo looked at Rio inquisitively.

"I don't mind," Rio said lightly, putting on his shoes to go outside.

"O... Okay. Then, if you would please." Sayo nodded excitedly and followed after Rio in a fluster.

"Rio, just because Sayo's cute doesn't mean you can make a pass at her when

you're alone!" Ruri said with a wicked grin.

"Huh...?"

"I would never."

Rio denied Ruri's words with a sidelong glance at Sayo, along with a bitter smile.

Ruri laughed flatly. "Ahaha, I'm just kidding. Go on, then. Look after Sayo," she said, leaving it to Rio.

"Yes, let us go... Sayo?" Rio nodded and looked at her.

Sayo had frozen on the spot, however, and was staring at Rio in a daze. When Rio called her name, she flinched with a gasp.

"Ah... Y-Yes! P-Please be gentle with me! I'll be in your care!" She bowed her head vigorously.

Rio's eyes widened until they bulged.

"Ahaha, why would he have to be gentle if he's just walking you home... What do you mean, Sayo?" Ruri laughed in amusement after a moment of silence, holding back her giggles.

"Huh...? Ah... N-No, that's not it!! I-I didn't mean it in a weird way!" Sayo denied with a great flurry of gestures.

"I see, I see. A weird way, huh? I wonder what way that is?" Ruri turned an inquisitive eye onto Sayo.

"N-Nothing..." Sayo replied, turning bright red and ducking her head.

"Come on, now. If you're going to fool about, then do it outside. It's getting later and later."

Yuba, who had been watching their exchange pleasantly, offered a lifeline to the gradually shrinking Sayo.

"Okaaay. See you later, you two. Rio, Sayo's afraid of the dark, so make sure you stick to the village roads!"

"I understand. Let's really get going, now, Sayo." With a faintly strained smile, Rio invited Sayo along, who remained frozen near the doorway outside.

“Yes,” she said.

“Are you afraid of the dark, Sayo?” Rio asked Sayo after they left the house and started down the road.

“...Eh, ah, umm... I’m not afraid, I’m just easily scared. When I’m alone, it’s kind of... I even get scared by the wind blowing the grass... J-Just like a child, right?” Sayo said with an embarrassed grin.

“No, I’m sure there are adults out there who don’t like that, either.”

“...Thank you very much. I’m really glad that you’re walking me home after all. It seems like everyone’s gone home already, so if I were alone now, I would have gotten scared and ran the whole way back.”

“Even the village falls completely silent at night, after all.”

“Yes... Achoo!”

As the two of them talked, Sayo started to feel a little cold and gave a cute sneeze. It was late spring, so the nights were still a little chilly. That day had been rather warm, however, so Sayo was only wearing thin layers.

“Here you go, Sayo.” Rio took off his own jacket and covered her shoulders.

“...T-Thank you very much,” Sayo thanked him timidly. Rio couldn’t see her expression in the dark, but scarlet red was staining her cheeks.

“Shin must be hungry by now, so let’s hurry. He’ll worry if you’re too late,” Rio said, hastening his pace a little bit.

“...Okay,” Sayo replied with a conflicted expression. She wanted to be together with Rio for just a little bit longer.

A Maiden’s Woes

In wintertime, on the first night of Komomo’s stay in the village, Komomo took Aio — her personal assistant — and Ruri to visit the village chief’s bathhouse.

“This is a splendid bath. Did Sir Rio really make this all by himself?” Komomo asked Ruri with a look of awe as they entered.

“Yeah. Rio knows a lot about everything and is super crafty with his hands. He used spirit arts and built this in less than two weeks. It’s become an essential facility in our village,” Ruri answered with a hint of pride.

“There are multiple bathtubs, too,” Aoi said as she looked around the room with deep interest.

“Yes. Having a single big bath would make it much more difficult to change the water, so it’s done this way to make it easier to adjust for the number of people bathing.”

“I see.” Aio hummed at Ruri’s explanation, exceedingly impressed. “It was certainly made with a lot of thought behind it, then.”

“Now that Rio’s filled the hot water for us, let’s get in before it cools. Otherwise, your body will get cold, too. Uugh, so chilly.” Ruri immediately headed towards the washing area.

“We have to wash our bodies first, right?”

“Allow me to wash your back, Lady Komomo.”

Komomo and Aoi followed after Ruri.

“I can wash your back next!” Komomo said to Ruri.

“Ahaha. Thank you, Komomo.”

When the sociable Ruri and overly-friendly Komomo were brought together, the two had become fast friends on the first day. They already opened up to each other enough to speak fondly to each other.

“Ruri, did I miss any spots?”

“It’s fine. Thank you, Komomo,” Ruri said after Komomo had washed her back thoroughly.

“Then, I’ll wash your front next,” Komomo said, winding her arms around Ruri’s chest from behind and hesitantly moving the towel.

“Huh...? Ah, huh?! W-Wait a minute! Komomo?!” Ruri started giggling at the ticklish sensation. Suddenly, Komomo’s hands stopped.

“...Hmph. They’re big,” she murmured.

“A-Ahaha. I’m going to ask just to be sure, but what are you talking about?”

“Your chest! Even though you’re only five years apart from me...” Komomo pouted her lips somewhat unhappily.

“W-Well, you’re still growing, Komomo.”

“...Really?”

“Y-Yup! You are. Right, Aoi?” Ruri nodded forcefully with a panicked face and turned to Aoi for help.

“Y-Yes. That’s right, Lady Komomo. I was about as big as you when I was your age,” Aoi said, bobbing her head enthusiastically.

“But... Even though Aoi’s several years older than Ruri, Ruri’s bigger than Aoi?”

“Ugh...”

The shock was enough to freeze Aoi’s hands from where they were washing Komomo’s back. She then brought both her hands up to cup her own chest.

“A-Ahaha. Well, individual results may vary.” Ruri evaded the point with a bitter smile.

“...I heard that lords prefer women with larger chests. Do you think Sir Rio is the same?” Komomo questioned in a somewhat worried way.

“L-Lady Komomo?! Why would you ask something like that?!” Aoi asked, taken aback.

“Aoi, now is not the time to point out trivial matters like that. What’s important here is Sir Rio’s preferences. What do you think, Ruri?” Komomo shook her head resolutely, pressing Ruri further.

“Huh? Ahaha. Umm, who knows...?” Ruri tilted her head stiffly and gave a dry laugh. Komomo’s expression darkened with sadness.

“Ah, t-then I’ll ask Rio next time I see him! Aha, ahaha...” Ruri promised for some reason, most likely because of the awkwardness rising within her.

“Really?!” Komomo’s expression bloomed brightly.

Ruri nodded with a shrill voice. “Y-Yeah. B-But I’m only going to ask. I don’t

know whether he'll answer or not..."

G-Geez, why am I agreeing to this so easily?! This is too embarrassing to ask! Ah, what am I going to do?! How am I going to ask him?!

Ruri was full of regret.

Cold Bath

During the first summer of Rio's stay in the village, there was a day where they experienced a heatwave rarely seen in recent years. The villagers suspended their farm work and hid away inside their homes.

"Uugh, it's hot." Ruri sat on a cushion in the living room and fanned the chest area of her kimono.

"Ruri. That's unsightly. What would Rio think if he came in?" Yuba scolded, furrowing her brows.

"It's fine. I'll fix it as soon as he comes in."

"Good grief..."

"Where is Rio, anyway?"

"Who knows. He didn't say he was going out somewhere, so maybe he's in his room?"

Neither of them had any clues as to Rio's location, but the front door opened and none other than Rio appeared.

"H-Huh? Rio, did you go out?" Ruri flinched and pulled her clothes straight in a fluster.

Ruri's chest area entered his gaze for a moment, but Rio casually averted his gaze. "...No. I was doing my daily training in the garden, and then I took a cold bath in the bathhouse."

"Eeh? You should rest on a day this hot. But a cold bath... I see, a cold bath. That's right, that's a good plan! Yup!"

Ruri had widened her eyes at the thought of Rio swinging his sword in the heat wave, but when she heard about the cold bath, she stood up vigorously as

though she had had an epiphany. The momentum made her drawn-together kimono fall open at the chest once more.

“Erm... Then, do you want to get in the bathtub? I can prepare it for you right away.” Rio whipped around in an instant and walked outside the front door.

“Eh? Ah, erm, yeah! Please! Ahaha... Sorry.” Ruri grinned apologetically and properly fixed her messy clothing.

“This child is so much trouble,” Yuba sighed in exasperation. Yuba gave Ruri a harsh lesson on the ways of behaving like a lady, then Ruri headed for the bathhouse after finally being released several minutes later.

“Geez, today’s incident was just an accident. I might have been careless a few times when Rio came, but still... It’s all because of the heat wave today. I have to lift my spirits and get into that cold bath... It really is too hot today...” Ruri pouted her lips, venting her dissatisfaction. As she fanned her chest area to cool down as she usually did, she reached the bathhouse. Then, when she reached a hand out to the bathhouse door, Rio exited the bathhouse.

“Ah, Ruri. I just finished the preparations. Go... ahead...” When he saw Ruri fanning her chest, he froze in surprise.

“A-Ahaha... S-Sorry, Rio,” Ruri apologized, hiding her chest with a twitching smile.

“N-No. I’m the one who’s sorry...” Rio apologized awkwardly.

“R-Right. You were supposed to be here. I really am being careless, aren’t I? Ah, keep this a secret from Granny. She just got mad at me earlier.” Ruri put her hands together and pleaded earnestly at Rio, as though in prayer.

“Sure, I don’t mind, but... Shouldn’t it be the opposite? With me saying ‘sorry.’”

Ruri tilted her head in contemplation. “Huh? Hmm. Now that you mention it, maybe? But it’s my fault — I was being careless,” she said, grinning shyly.

“Haha. I’m going to go now, so cool yourself down to your heart’s content.”

“Yeah. Thank you... Ah, Rio. Do you want to get in, too?” Ruri asked inquisitively.

Rio shook his head bluntly. “No.”

“Ahaha, just kidding.” Ruri laughed flatly.

“Please, take your time.” Rio smiled somewhat happily and took his leave. Then, just as he arrived at the front door, Ruri screamed.

“H-Hyah! So cold! R-Rio! Make it hotter!”

...Guess I cooled it a little too much. Rio turned on his heel with a wry smile. He was met with the sight of a completely unguarded Ruri once again, but that’s another story for another day.



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